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That's So Meta: Contemporary Reflexive Television and its Textual Strategies

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Contemporary Reflexive Television and Its Textual Strategies

by

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Dedication

To Adam for

Always Knowing That I Was the “Smart One”

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Abstract

That's So Meta

Contemporary Reflexive Television and Its Narrative Strategies

By

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This thesis examines existing discourse from the areas of film and literature studies in order to explore the complex textual applications and rhetorical functions of contemporary reflexive television. Characterized by its self-conscious effacement of the boundaries traditionally established by works of fiction, televisual reflexivity uses such interrelated textual strategies as meta-reference, meta-production, and meta-episodes in order to foreground the inherent artifice and mediation of television programming, ultimately conveying a form of implicit, and often parodic, self-analysis and interpretation within the diegesis of a given series. Additionally, the project examines a number of ways in which the emergence of digital media has affected reflexive television programming, illustrating how these reflexive series both project and reflect the types of active audience engagement engendered by digital media, suggesting a fundamental change in the relationship between media producer and consumer. As exemplified through the representative case studies of *Arrested Development*, *30 Rock*, and *Supernatural*, this

thesis illustrates how reflexive television purposefully uses such varied strategies as meta-reference, meta-production, and meta-episodes in order to reflect our current media landscape and the increasingly engaged, media literate, and participatory audience by which it is characterized.

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Introduction

A formal and stylistic strategy employed throughout various media genres, texts, and platforms, reflexivity is characterized by its self-conscious destabilization of the conventional boundaries established by works of art. While reflexivity is traditionally recognized within the discourses of film and literature, reflexive television has experienced a recent, yet steady rise in visibility. Like its cinematic and literary counterparts, reflexive television employs the use of various techniques in order to foreground its own artifice and mediation, ultimately calling attention to the formal conventions of the medium. Reflecting a growing trend in television programming, as evidenced by such series as *30 Rock*, *Supernatural*, and *Arrested Development*, reflexive television conveys a self-conscious awareness of its own creative and cultural contexts, essentially addressing the changing relationship between media producer and consumer. This growing reciprocity between industry and audience is largely enabled by the emergence of digital media, which allows viewers to provide candid feedback that is instantly accessible to industry professionals. Contextualized through existing discourse in the areas of film and literature, and facilitated through the transparency and interactivity afforded by new media, reflexive television purposefully uses such varied techniques as meta-reference, meta-production, and meta-episodes in order to reflect our current media landscape and the increasingly engaged, media literate, and participatory audience through which it is characterized.

In service of coherence and clarity, I will use the term "reflexivity" and its multiple variants in order to describe the necessarily purposeful nature of the textual deconstructions that comprise the focus of this study. Additionally, it is important to make clear that when I use the term "deconstruction," I am not referring to Jacques Derrida's canonical form of semiotic

analysis, but am rather using the term to describe a mode of self-conscious dissection and investigation. While reflexivity is distinguished by its more active connotation, there are other compatible terms that also encapsulate the implicitly critical agenda of reflexivity: self-aware, self-referential, and self-conscious. For the purposes of this study, each of these terms is considered synonymous with the larger distinction of reflexivity, as they effectively convey the characteristic introversion and self-analysis of reflexive television. While these terms will be used interchangeably, I privilege the use of reflexivity due to its wider recognition among critics, scholars, and audiences alike, as well as its inherent emphasis on critique and its basis in literary theory.

A clarification of terminology necessarily leads me to address the issue of scope as it relates to the broader term of reflexivity. Largely due to its extensive presence within various genres, texts, and media platforms, the question of the definitive range of reflexivity is an issue that commonly arises among scholars. Following the practical logic of Craig Hight in his book *Television Mockumentary: Reflexivity, Satire and a Call to Play*, a more useful and accordingly nuanced definition of televisual reflexivity results from understanding it as a discourse. However, because there is comparatively little scholarship on televisual reflexivity, I use the term "discourse" instead to refer to a mode of organizing knowledge and assertions, rather than an extensive expression of theory on a certain subject. While Hight is specifically referring to his analysis of mockumentary, his discourse formulation is highly relevant as it relates to reflexivity, as labeling the term a discourse encapsulates "… not only the broad patterns to its agenda and aesthetics, but also how [reflexivity] has been continually reshaped within specific texts [and] genres…"[1] In other words, because it appears across a broad range of different texts and genres, televisual reflexivity cannot be formulated as a genre unto itself, but rather a distinct set of

narrative strategies open to interpretation among television texts. Situating televisual reflexivity as a discourse will allow me to further explore its formal characteristics, diverse textual manifestations, and its relationship with its evolving creative and cultural contexts.

Reflexivity and Digital Media

The relatively recent emergence of our current digital society has fundamentally altered the way in which media is produced, consumed, and distributed. New innovations in digital technology like the Internet, DVDs, and digital video recorders (DVR) have contributed to the increasing fragmentation of the television audience, as viewers are now divided amongst numerous distribution platforms offering diverse media content. Importantly, as television networks compete for the attention of progressively fractured audiences, inventive programming strategies emerge and multiply. In its projection and reflection of the contemporary television audience, reflexivity illustrates this move toward programming innovation and the encouragement of active audience engagement.

In his canonical book *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, Henry Jenkins uses this eponymous term in order to describe the flow of media content across multiple platforms, essentially encapsulating the increased cooperation between multiple media industries that characterizes our current digital society. At the center of this conceptualization of media convergence is participatory culture, as the circulation of media content across varying platforms relies heavily on the active participation of consumers who "are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content."[2] As Jenkins states, "The term, participatory culture, contrasts with older notions of passive media spectatorship. Rather than talking about media producers and consumers occupying separate roles, we might now see

them as participants who interact with each other according to a new set of rules that none of us fully understands."[3] Especially as it relates to reflexivity, Jenkins makes a crucial point regarding participatory culture: While there is no doubt that the relationship between media producer and consumer is changing, the exact nature of that relationship is up for considerable debate. However, it is not my intention to offer a definitive rubric for the terms of this participation. Rather, I seek to explore how the transparency afforded by digital media has contributed to the growing reciprocity and interactivity between media producer and consumer as it relates to the ability of reflexive television to invite active audience engagement.

In her book *Beyond the Box: Television and the Internet*, Sharon Marie Ross examines the crucial role of the Internet in contemporary fan studies, as well as its overall effect on television aesthetics and consumption. Focusing on programs with active online fan bases, Ross states, "… Many of these shows, through either direct textual moments or via producer and writer interviews in entertainment forums, were evidencing a heightened awareness of the existence of their fans both online and offline."[4] Here, Ross encapsulates a crucial function of televisual reflexivity. Through the transparency afforded by digital media, reflexive television series diegetically evidence an awareness of their viewers by encouraging active audience engagement through the complexity of their references. In other words, reflexive television uses various meta-techniques in order to invite further discussion and interpretation among viewers, and perhaps even generates new modes of readership.

Ross refers to television's ability to encourage audience engagement as diegetic "invitations to tele-participation," offering three categories of textual manifestation. First, the "overt" categorization refers to an instance in which the producers' intent to activate viewer participation is readily discernible within the text of the series. An example from reflexive

television includes direct address, as the show overtly invokes the audience by acknowledging their presence on the other side of the screen. Second, the "organic" category describes a more natural style that is designed to appear as if the show is not directly inviting the viewer to extend the text. As Ross states, "With organic invitations, the show/network assumes that tele-participation is an already occurring element of viewers' ways of watching."[5] Examples from reflexive television would consistently appear on a show like *Supernatural*, which features a more active cult following. As the producers of *Supernatural* would therefore pre-suppose viewers' active participation, any subtle meta-reference would exemplify Ross' organic categorization. Finally, "obscured" invitations appear less on reflexive television than they do on contemporary television programming in general, as this category refers to a style of invitation that operates on a primarily aesthetic level. In other words, a narratively complex program like *Lost* illustrates obscured invitations to tele-participation by inviting viewers to unravel its complicated narrative structure and content.[6] Ross' invitations to tele-participation contextualize the ways in which reflexive television demonstrates a similar ability to invite viewer participation. As the emergence of digital media continues to affect the relationship between producer and consumer, reflexive television and its various textual strategies both project and reflect active audience engagement, evoking the increasingly participatory nature of contemporary media.

Reflexivity and Postmodernism

Like reflexive television, the cultural theory of postmodernism is concerned with the tendency toward aesthetic introversion and foregrounding mediation. However, postmodern theorists often ascribe a negative value judgment to reflexivity as it relates to postmodernism,

largely asserting the narrative strategy as the vacuous termination of the theories of modernism. In his canonical "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," Fredric Jameson states, "… In a wild in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, all that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum."[7] This conceptualization of reflexivity is unnecessarily reductive, as it does not account for its continuing formal and aesthetic innovations, its underlying critical agenda, and its larger creative and cultural implications. In his book *Postmodernism and Popular Culture: A Cultural History*, John Docker argues, "[Postmodernism] sees popular culture as a frequent site of flamboyance, extravagance, excess, parody, self-parody, a self-parody that has philosophical implications for popular culture as a worldview, a cosmology, a poetics."[8] Despite the fact that he is specifically referring to postmodernism, Docker nevertheless emphasizes the critical and transformative power of reflexivity as it diegetically operates as a form of self-parody and analysis.

While postmodernism provides an important theoretical foundation for this study, it cannot be a totalizing framework through which to conceptualize what is at work within these reflexive television shows. In fact, much of this thesis will analyze the use of reflexive narrative techniques within specific texts rather than overarching theory. In addition, as reflexivity is traditionally recognized within the contexts of film and literature studies, a resulting wealth of existing discourse has largely established its common formal attributes. However, comparatively little scholarship exists on the particular subject of televisual reflexivity and its medium specificity. The guiding purpose of this study is both to contribute to the comparatively minimal, but vital literature on televisual reflexivity and to explore the range of textual applications and functions of reflexive techniques within the specific context of contemporary television. However, I must first contextualize this study through existing discourse in order to apply the

established theories of film and literature studies to an analysis of televisual reflexivity and its related narrative techniques.

Televisual Reflexivity: A Legacy of Film and Literature

In her book *Parody // Meta-Fiction*, Margaret Rose situates her two eponymous concepts as an "archaeology" of the text, arguing that literary parody foregrounds and analyzes the epistemological, historical, and social contexts affecting a given composition. Citing such classic examples of meta-fiction as *Don Quixote* and *Tristram Shandy*, she asserts the dual roles of imitation and irony in the effective deployment of literary parody. Defining irony simply as a statement of ambiguous character, Rose argues that these ironic statements include a code that implies at least two messages, that of the ironist to their initiated audience and that of the ironically meant "decoy" message. She uses this formulation of the ambiguity of irony to reflect the multiplicity of messages that the embedding of one text within another often engenders. While I recognize the natural association between irony and parody, I do not find the concept of irony to be useful within the context of this study due to its specific association with the verbal utterance. Rather, the broader notion of double-coded language appears to be the main rhetorical mechanism for activating the viewer's awareness of a parodic or reflexive message.

Due to this plurality of messages engendered by the double-coded language of parody, Rose also examines the issues of reception that are typically associated with meta-fiction. She essentially argues that literary parody, by making its critical subject part of its own structure, depends in part on the reader's simultaneous recognition of both the parodic and parodied texts for maximum critical and comic effect. In defining meta-fiction, Rose ultimately states, "…Some parody provides a 'mirror' to fiction, in the ironic form of the imitation of art in art, as well as by

more direct references to these authors, books, and readers."[9] In her emphasis on the related concepts of parody, double-coded language, and reception, Rose provides a necessary theoretical foundation for the study of contemporary reflexivity and self-parody.

While Rose situates a theory of double-coded language as central to her conceptualization of meta-fiction, Robert Stam, in his book *Reflexivity in Film and Literature: From Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard*, largely focuses his analysis on the contentious relationship between illusionism and reflexivity that exists within all art forms. As Stam contends, "Reflexive works break with art as enchantment and call attention to their own factitiousness as textual constructs. This tension between the two tendencies characterizes all art…"[10] Stated simply, Stam argues that reflexive works foreground their own artifice and formal conventions, subverting the sense of seamless illusionism that typically characterizes works of fiction. Importantly, Stam argues that this inherent tension is at its most ambiguous when contextualized through televisual reflexivity. He essentially claims that reflexive television is the preeminent example of "debased reflexivity," as it is largely concerned with a commercial, rather than critical, agenda. Stam ultimately concludes that the central narrative strategy of any reflexive work is that of discontinuity. While illusionist art works to achieve an overall impression of narrative and temporal coherence, reflexive art "…calls attention to the gaps and holes and seams in the narrative tissue."[11] While my particular assertions regarding reflexive television are in direct opposition to Stam's notion of debased reflexivity, he establishes the formal and aesthetic developments of reflexivity in film and literature and provides crucial analysis of its inherent critical purpose and agenda.

In the introduction to *Metareference Across Media: Theory and Case Studies*, Werner Wolf largely differs from Rose and Stam in his specific focus on the concept of meta-reference.

Despite its inclusion of examples of this eponymous technique in everything from poetry to music, this otherwise comprehensive collection conspicuously omits the topic of televisual reflexivity. However, Wolf offers a thorough analysis of the many textual applications, functions, and larger social and cultural implications of meta-reference. In defining the term, Wolf states, "[Meta-reference] is a special, transmedial form of usually non-accidental self-reference produced by signs or sign configurations which are (felt to be) located on a logically higher level, a 'meta-level,' within an artifact or performance…"[12] This rather exhaustive definition reflects Wolf's larger focus on the implicit issues of reception and intention typically associated with reflexivity. While he does address the fact that authorial intention is a highly speculative and problematic enterprise, Wolf argues that meta-reference is characterized by the presence of what he terms "potentials" in a given text. Echoing Ross' assertions regarding television's invitations to tele-participate, Wolf's potentials essentially refer to any diegetic use of a reflexive strategy that invites active audience engagement. For example, in an episode of *Arrested Development* entitled "Motherboy XXX" (2:13), a particularly complex meta-reference exemplifies Wolf's notion of diegetic potentials. After Gob accidentally kills a shark in search of the seal that bit off Buster's hand, he and Michael call in their attorney, Barry Zuckerkorn (Henry Winkler), to discuss the matter. Following their brief conversation, Barry announces his departure, eagerly jumping over the body of the dead shark. This incident offers an example of both a complex visual meta-reference, as well as one of Wolf's textual potentials, as viewers must be familiar with Winkler's previous work on *Happy Days* and the now infamous "jumping the shark" episode in order to actualize the reflexive message. Wolf ultimately argues that while these potentials may have meta-effects, the successful conveyance of medium awareness through the text requires actualization by a willing recipient. Although Wolf is particularly terminology-

focused, he nonetheless provides a thorough analysis of the diverse textual applications, functions, and critical implications of meta-reference, a major technique of reflexivity, and the subject of the first chapter of this thesis.

In his specific focus on the industrial context of contemporary reflexivity, John Thornton Caldwell differs most obviously from the more traditional approaches of Rose, Stam, and Wolf. In his book, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television*, Caldwell explores the relatively recent tendency toward industrial self-reflection as a form of highly visible and accessible entertainment. As he states, "Once considered secondary or backstory phenomena, industry self-analysis and self-representation now serve as primary on-screen entertainment forms across a vast multimedia landscape."[13] According to Caldwell, these new forms of on-screen entertainment include anything from DVD commentary tracks to industry-sponsored fan conventions. Caldwell ultimately asserts that these artifacts are indicative of the highly self-conscious organization of various production industries around activities of critical and aesthetic interpretation, stating, "Scholars must first recognize and acknowledge that they are attempting to engage with and interpret an industry that already constantly interprets and scrutinizes itself with both embedded and onscreen meta-criticisms."[14] Caldwell's analysis provides necessary industrial context, while also reflecting the larger concerns of this study in the diverse textual manifestations and functions of televisual reflexivity.

While each of these texts contribute to the foundation of my argument in existing film and literature studies, it is important to note that televisual reflexivity is not simply a transfer of formal techniques and thematic construction from its cinematic and literary predecessors. Rather, it is the purpose of this study to explore televisual reflexivity through its own medium

specificity, analyzing the diverse textual applications and rhetorical functions of reflexive techniques within the specific context of contemporary television.

As evidenced by the extensive study of postmodern film and literature, reflexivity has historically experienced a rich tradition in many artistic discourses. As Wolf states, "For as soon as a given medium no longer has a predominantly pragmatic function and obtains at least a certain degree of autonomy… it at the same time acquires a potential for metaization."[15] Here, Wolf suggests that the rich history of reflexivity in our aesthetic discourses may largely be attributed to this potential for self-reflection. In other words, the wider cultural recognition of a given medium ultimately leads to its tendency toward implicit meta-commentary. Reflecting this naturalization of the television medium, my analysis seeks to situate reflexivity within its current cultural and industrial contexts, examining the ways in which the highly participatory nature of our media landscape, as facilitated by the transparency of digital media, affects the perpetuation of certain formal patterns, as well as the creative innovations of this particular discourse.

While the influence of existing film and literature studies on our current conceptualization of reflexivity is evident, the particular tradition of televisual reflexivity is also based in the technological changes engendered by the transition from radio to television. As Joann Gardner states, "A combination of seemingly sophisticated techniques, artistic self-referentiality has played a part in television comedy since its inception, and the more successful comedies have used its devices to make implicit comments upon their creative methods and skill."[16] Offering a decidedly historicized approach to reflexivity, Gardner examines the implicit presence of self-referentiality in such early television programs as *The Goldbergs*, *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show*, and *The Jack Benny Show*, each of these series exemplifying the transition from one medium to another. Much of the early methods of televisual reflexivity may

be directly attributed to this transition, as narration, product placement, and direct address are obvious televisual adaptations of traditional radio techniques. Additionally, as evident in the eponymous titles of the preceding examples, a more distinct illustration of early reflexivity was the tradition of established radio personalities playing caricatures of themselves. This proliferation of self-referential humor is the direct product of the transition from radio to television; as such popular personalities as George Burns and Gracie Allen had pre-existing audiences from their radio programs. This tradition of televisual reflexivity ultimately leads both to the contemporary adaptation of these established norms, including self-conscious product placement and voiceover narration, as well as numerous creative innovations, including meta-reference and more explicit forms of intertextuality. Even the more distinct tradition of characters playing versions of themselves is currently evident in Louis C.K.'s comically self-deprecating *Louie* or Jemaine Clement and Bret McKenzie's semi-autobiographical *Flight of the Conchords*.

Reflexivity and (Meta-) Parody

Importantly, as parody is the principal method of formal and thematic construction within reflexive texts, any study of contemporary reflexivity would be incomplete without first establishing the necessity of parody as a guiding theory. Like the various techniques that comprise reflexivity, parody employs the use of such techniques as quotation, reproduction, and allusion in order to incorporate critical commentary into the structure of a given text. Although a wealth of existing discourses have examined the many aspects that inform our current conceptions of parody, I will primarily focus on Simon Dentith's eponymous *Parody* and Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth Century Art Forms*. Both Dentith

and Hutcheon contextualize their larger arguments through the guiding concept of imitation, but differ slightly in their formal definitions of parody. While Dentith argues that "…parody includes any cultural practice which provides a relatively polemical allusive imitation of another cultural production or practice,"[17] Hutcheon defines parody as "… repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity."[18] Although both theorists assert the overall significance of imitation in framing their conceptions of parody, Dentith differs from Hutcheon in his focus upon the polemical, using the term to "…allude to the contentious or 'attacking' mode in which parody can be written …"[19] In other words, Dentith essentially argues that a totalizing definition of parody – one that encapsulates a single social imperative – is impractical due to the often opposing nature of its textual functions. This is not to say that Hutcheon disregards the inherently dichotomous nature of parody, she simply does not position this contradictory function as central to her definition. Rather, Hutcheon refers to this ancillary notion as the "paradox of parody," arguing that the use of double-coded language leads to the implication of both authority and transgression within the parodic text; which ultimately evokes the two main theories regarding the nature of the attitude of the parodist to the imitated text. In brief, the first theory asserts that the imitation of the parodied text has the purpose of mocking it, while the second maintains that the parodist imitates a text in order to reappropriate the distinct style of that text. While the first theory simply uses parody as a form of comic imitation, the second suggests that the parodist has both a critical and admiring attitude toward the imitated text.

Due to their characteristically internal nature, the concepts of reflexivity and self-parody fundamentally alter our understandings of this notion, as the parodic messages of reflexive television series are necessarily directed toward the text itself. While some of the strategies of reflexive television gesture beyond the boundaries of the text, namely intertextuality and product

placement, the majority of these narrative techniques deploy their critical functions through deliberate self-analysis. Within the context of this reconceptualization, I will largely focus on the critical and transgressive qualities of parody; as parodic reflexivity acts as a form of stylistic confrontation, transforming the parodic text through the reinterpretation of existing aesthetic and narrative forms and through its knowing use of self-parody and analysis.

In order to craft a working definition of parody that will serve as a structural framework to this study, I will briefly return to the work of Rose in combination with that of Hutcheon. As Hutcheon states, "Overtly imitating art more than life, parody self-consciously and self-critically points us to its own nature."[20] Importantly, in this more internal conceptualization of parody, Hutcheon emphasizes the defining feature of reflexivity: its deliberate self-critique and self-awareness. Explicating this characteristic introversion even further, Rose states, "… Parody is, as meta-fiction, able to demonstrate critically the processes involved in the production and reception of fiction from within a literary text…"[21] Despite the fact that Rose is addressing parody as it specifically relates to meta-fiction, her argument is relevant as it applies to the concept of reflexivity. Contextualized through existing scholarship on parody and meta-fiction, I assert my working definition of what I will term "meta-parody": a formal organizing structure that uses various techniques of knowing allusion in order to self-consciously critique its own mediated nature. As Rose states, "For in self-parody the function of meta-fictional parody to reflect upon its own medium is pre-eminent."[22] However, it is important to note that not all parody acts in a meta-fictional or deconstructive manner. In fact, many texts employ the use of parody or pastiche as structural conventions without offering any form of deliberate self-critique.

In addition, any consideration of parody would be incomplete if it were not distinguished from its numerous related concepts, most importantly, satire and pastiche. As Hutcheon states,

"… [Satire], unlike parody, is both moral and social in its focus and ameliorative in its intention. This is not to say… that parody does not have ideological or even social implications."[23] While parody is not necessarily defined by a social or political imperative, it is highly critical in nature and often serves to reflect and comment upon its social context. Additionally, parody in general, and meta-parody in particular, relies upon allusions to other texts for its application, whereas satire is not restricted to the imitation of other media texts, but rather to larger societal and cultural issues. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the use of satire typically suggests a negative value judgment, as the purpose of satire is to critique a given issue to ridiculous effect. However, "…[Hutcheon] found no such negative judgment is necessarily suggested in the ironic contrasting of texts. Parody both deviates from an aesthetic norm and includes that norm within itself… Any real attack would be self-destructive."[24] Both parody and satire incorporate allusions to a given textual subject in order to offer forms of analytical commentary, but they are distinguished by their overall critical agendas, the nature of their appropriations, and ultimately, the diverse readings they stimulate in audiences.

More closely related to parody, pastiche rarely describes an entire text, but is rather a parodic technique typically used within a text for comic effect. In his book *Pastiche* Richard Dyer argues that the eponymous term is essentially characterized by combination and imitation. He asserts that pastiche, in its amalgamation of various elements borrowed from other texts, is fundamentally defined as a conscious imitation. Furthermore, he argues that to imitate something is to refer to it, therefore associating pastiche with such related terms as reference, allusion, and intertextuality. In defining the concept, Dyer states, "… [Pastiche] imitates other art in such a way as to make consciousness of this fact central to its meaning and effect."[25] In its focus upon the knowingly critical introversion of pastiche, this concise definition is related to the assertion

of meta-parody above. However, the distinction between these two highly similar conventions is the notion that parody elucidates the difference between two texts, while pastiche reinforces their similarity. In other words, where parody is transformative, pastiche is merely imitative.

Considering both the ubiquity of parody as a textual construct and the distinctive nature of our current media landscape, I propose meta-parody as a defining feature of contemporary representations of this strategy. While Dentith and Hutcheon focus their analyses on more traditional aesthetic forms, like poetry, theater, and literature, our current historical era situates television as an exemplary platform through which to study the concept of modern reflexivity; for, as Hutcheon states, "Perhaps parody can flourish today because we live in a technological world in which culture has replaced nature as the subject of art."[26] Therefore, televisual reflexivity, and its use of parody as its primary organizing structure, encapsulates our current social context through its reflection of the increasingly participatory and media literate audience that characterizes contemporary media consumption.

Chapter Outline

Having established the necessary defining terms and framing theories of this study, I now turn to the various sections that will comprise the body of my argument. Each chapter focuses upon a particular technique commonly employed on reflexive television, utilizing a distinct set of contemporary television series in order to illustrate the function of reflexivity in a variety of different contexts. In each of the three chapters, one major case study will frame my in-depth analysis of the various textual manifestations and rhetorical functions of the given reflexive strategy. Importantly, I examine representative television texts in order to explore larger issues in contemporary media studies. The specific assertions I make regarding televisual reflexivity serve

to both illuminate the changing relationship between media producer and consumer, while also reflecting the increasingly tangible influence of digital technology on the aesthetics of television production. Each chapter of this thesis examines one of the characteristic aspects of modern reflexivity by analyzing the diverse manifestations of these techniques on specific reflexive television texts.

In the first chapter, I explore the concept of meta-reference as it is consistently illustrated throughout the narrative of *Arrested Development*. A rather broad term that encompasses various related topics, meta-reference deliberately calls attention to the mediated nature of reflexive television programs, foregrounding their artifice through the use of such techniques as intertextuality, inside jokes, and (voiceover) narration. This section also addresses issues of the double-coded language of parody and the resulting expectation placed on the viewer in terms first of recognition, and then of interpretation. The second chapter will examine a concept that I term "meta-production," the use of knowing references to various aspects of the production process. Regularly incorporating references to issues of corporate ownership, as well as the conscious use of product placement for both critical and comical effect, *30 Rock* best encapsulates the diegetic function of this strategy. Additionally, this chapter acknowledges the inherently commercial issues associated with meta-production, exploring whether this unique aspect of reflexivity is democratizing or simply pervasive. Finally, the third chapter will analyze the concept of meta-episodes as they occasionally appear on *Supernatural*. Referring to individual episodes of a given program that break with series conventions, meta-episodes self-consciously deconstruct various aspects of a given television text, whether through genre, actors, or even the series as a whole. I ultimately argue that meta-episodes are perhaps the most self-

aware and deliberate of the techniques of reflexive television, as they fundamentally dramatize the notion of producer awareness of consumer practices.

Due to the relatively brief and necessarily limited nature of this study, my topics of focus and their respective case studies do not pretend to be exhaustive. Rather than pursuing a larger assortment of superficially analyzed examples, I am choosing to focus on three in-depth case studies, for, as Dyer states, "… since the value of a generalization can only be judged by its ability to survive the qualification… that the detail and particularity of any example must entail, it is important to discuss examples reasonably thoroughly…"[27] The in-depth analysis of these three chosen techniques is intended to be evocative of reflexivity as a whole, illustrating its methods, textual manifestations, and cultural implications. My rationale for the choice of these main areas of focus is largely concerned with inclusivity. Stated simply, each of these three techniques, despite differing methods of implementation, achieves a similar narrative and contextual effect. Whether through intertextual reference or a deconstruction of series conventions, each technique both reveals the artifice of reflexive television and evokes a process of interpretation in the individual viewer. Furthermore, while the pursuit of relative diligence guides my examination of these three case studies, it is also my intention to establish contrast through an analysis of the varying textual manifestations of televisual reflexivity. In other words, an investigation of the various diegetic and non-diegetic functions of reflexive techniques, as well as an exploration of how these techniques are used for either comical or critical effect, or both, will provide needed variation to the individual sections comprising this study.

In developing a rationale for my choices of representative television programs, I largely followed two important criteria. First, I wanted to illustrate the use of these techniques across a variety of television genres and styles, hence the inclusion of an innovative comedy, a

traditionally formulaic sitcom, and an hour-long drama. Second, and following the logic of Dyer above, each of the examples would require the "ability to survive qualification." In other words, I considered whether or not these texts were clearly validated through their association with a given technique, essentially examining the degree to which each case study was illuminated by analyzing it as an exemplar of televisual reflexivity. It is important to note that my focus on textual analysis is not meant to be a value-laden investigation of a current trend in televisual style. Rather, I seek to analyze both the larger implications of televisual reflexivity, while also explicating the inherent structural and aesthetic changes engendered by the emergence of digital media. In an article entitled "Television as an Aesthetic Medium," David Thorburn states,

> To understand our television system… we must be able to read these texts in something of the way the audience experiences them: as stories or dramas, as aesthetic artifacts, whose meaning will be fully available only if we employ, along with other interpretive methods, the strategies of reading traditionally used by critics of literature and film.[28]

Again supporting the foundation of this study in the theories of film and literature, Thorburn argues for the inherent value of aesthetic analysis, situating television aesthetics as an essential element to understanding the medium as a whole. Textual analysis, specifically that of my three main case studies, will therefore serve not only to illustrate the numerous practical manifestations of televisual reflexivity, but will also further explicate a unique understanding of reception, as it is projected within the very structure of the reflexive text.

Due to their current popularity, I would like to briefly address the deliberate exclusion of "documentary-like" television series from the analysis included in this study. A concept first introduced by Brett Mills,[29] "comedy verité" is a term used to describe the documentary-like televisual style of such recent sitcoms as *The Office*, *Parks and Recreation*, and *Modern Family*. While these programs may initially appear to foreground their mediation through the use of such

techniques as handheld cameras, conspicuous zooms, and direct-to-camera interviews, these technical methods are in fact in service of creating a sense of reality. In an article entitled "Comedy Verité? The Observational Documentary Meets the Televisual Sitcom," Ethan Thompson states simply, "… [comedy verité describes] programs whose content… blurs the distinction between real and unreal."[30] Where documentary-like series seek to blur the boundary between reality and fiction, reflexive television actively works to foreground its artifice. Paul Booth and Brian Ekdale even further explicate this contradiction of intention by adopting a qualified reading of Jean Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality,[31] a simulation of reality that becomes more real than "real" itself, in order to situate *The Office* as a hyperreality. They state, "Fictional programs that adopt the cinema verité form of documentaries do so to highlight their intended humor or social critique through simulated presentation of reality."[32] While comedy verité and reflexive television ultimately share a comical and critical focus, they fundamentally differ in creative agenda. While documentary-like series work to simulate reality, adhering to the "seamless" imperative typically associated with cinema, reflexive television purposefully foregrounds its simulation, privileging a form of discontinuity over coherence.

However, it would be incorrect to position reflexivity and realism as fundamentally antithetical terms; in fact, the majority of reflexive texts combine a general sense of reality with the use of reflexive techniques. As Stam argues, "Realism and reflexivity are not strictly opposed polarities but rather interpenetrating tendencies quite capable of coexistence within the same text."[33] Such reflexive television texts dramatize the everyday realities of the social and cultural contexts from which they emerge, while also prompting viewers to periodically recognize their artificiality. One such program that serves as an exemplar of this coexistence between realism and reflexivity is *Arrested Development*. Due to its documentary-like televisual style, the series

is often considered comedy verité, or perhaps more accurately, "mockumentary." However, where the deliberate use of technical methods like handheld camerawork or revealing brief glimpses of the documentary crew serve to heighten the sense of realism achieved by most comedy verité, *Arrested Development* instead uses these techniques for the purposes of comical discontinuity and self-referentiality. Despite its categorization as a mockumentary, I chose to include *Arrested Development* as one of my main case studies due to its consistent deployment of knowingly reflexive techniques, ultimately directing attention to the medium itself rather than a represented form of reality.

In addition, due to the current ubiquity of reality television, the distinction between fictional and nonfictional texts is also relevant here. While the "scriptedness" of reality television often calls into question the supposed truth of the representation, the effect of these shows on television programming in general, and reflexive television in particular cannot be overstated. In their article "Reflexivity in Television Depictions of Media Industries: Peeking Behind the Gilt Curtain," Brooke E. Duffy, Tara Liss-Mariño, and Katherine Sender state, "Reality programs have reinforced across both reality and fictional genres the constructedness of media representations."[34] Paradoxically, despite using a variety of documentary-like techniques to convey a sense of spontaneity and truth, reality television has instead reminded audiences of the inherent artificiality of the medium. As reflexive television consistently employs many of the same narrative strategies as reality shows, including direct address and product placement, this broader reinforcement of the artificiality of media representations could only strengthen the ability of the viewer to recognize references to this artificiality in fictional texts.

Conclusion

Through the unique combination of established film and literature studies, I seek to explore the range of textual applications and functions of reflexive techniques within the specific medium of television. Primarily through textual analysis, the larger purpose of this thesis is to examine the relationship between reflexivity as a formal development and its current cultural and creative contexts. By analyzing the formal structure of this unique televisual discourse, we can begin to appreciate the connections made between broader concerns of our current media landscape, emerging creative tendencies, and the changing relationship between media producer and consumer, all of which strongly evoke the contemporary transformations engendered by the emergence of digital media and the Internet, as well as the increasingly participatory nature of communication and entertainment in general.

Chapter One: Meta-Reference

Comprised of a number of interrelated textual strategies, meta-reference is perhaps the most familiar technique employed by reflexive television texts, as it refers to the types of generally humorous utterances common to this mode of programming. Stated simply, meta-reference is a form of deliberate self-critique and analysis, a textual strategy that not only calls attention to the formal and narrative conventions of the medium, but also encourages a process of active interpretation among viewers. Contextualized through my definition of meta-parody, a formal structure characterized by the use of allusive techniques that serve to self-consciously critique the mediation of a given text, meta-reference largely refers to an emphasis on internal criticism. As Linda Hutcheon states, "Art forms have increasingly appeared to distrust external criticism to the extent that they have sought to incorporate critical commentary within their own structures…"[1] In other words, as a response to various forms of external criticism, media representations are increasingly incorporating their own interpretive frameworks within the bodies of the texts themselves. In this chapter, I will explore the concept of meta-reference as it is consistently illustrated throughout reflexive television series, focusing on *Arrested Development* (2003-2006) as a representative case study. Using such related techniques as intertextuality, ongoing or inside jokes, and voiceover narration, meta-reference deliberately calls attention to the mediated nature of reflexive television programming, ultimately serving to foreground both the artifice, as well as the established formal and narrative conventions of a given series. Furthermore, through the implementation of meta-reference as a recognizable element of narrative, television producers both parallel and project active audience engagement with the television text, so I will therefore illustrate how meta-reference places an expectation on the viewer first in terms of recognition, and then of interpretation.[2] As complex narrative content

extends across multiple episodes and reflexive strategies place an increasing demand on the interpretive practices of the savvy viewer, audiences become active participants in the construction of narrative; ultimately indicating that the effective transmission of a given reflexive message is reliant upon active audience engagement.

Like reflexivity in general, meta-reference encompasses a range of different narrative techniques, all of which are characterized by their focus on calling attention to the mediation of the television text. By way of defining the concept of meta-reference, I will further explicate the following definition offered by Werner Wolf. As Wolf states,

> [Metareference] is a special, transmedial form of usually non-accidental self-reference produced by signs or sign configurations which are (felt to be) located on a logically higher level, a 'meta-level,' within an artifact or performance; this self-reference, which can extend from this artifact to the entire system of the media, forms or implies a statement about an object-level, namely on (aspects of) the medium/system referred to.[3]

Within his larger analysis of meta-reference, Wolf places much of his focus on what he terms the "meta-level," a secondary reference to a certain text established through the deliberate use of meta-reference. In other words, the meta-level refers to a reference being made from a perspective that is necessarily outside of the text, ultimately serving to differentiate between unmediated reality and the content of mediated representation. While I agree with the concept of a meta-level – as a text must adopt a necessarily secondary stance in order to effectively critique its own embedded conventions – I disagree with the notion that this meta-level is outside of the text. Rather, a reflexive text must adopt this secondary perspective from within the narrative in order to comment upon its own structure and aesthetics. Importantly, Wolf addresses what is perhaps the defining characteristic of televisual meta-reference: its purposeful revelation of the highly mediated nature of the television text. As Margaret Rose further elucidates, "In the mimicry of his own style the author provides a commentary to the essential features of his

writing as well as to the nature of fiction as a creation – or 'product' – of the writer: self-parody both mirrors and questions the act of creating fictional worlds."[4] While Rose is specifically referring to self-parody, her argument is nonetheless applicable to the related concept of meta-reference. Rose refers both to her conceptualization of a meta-level, in which the self-parody inherently comments upon its creation of a mediated storyworld, and also addresses the larger implications of meta-reference, those of self-critique and internal critical commentary. It is important to briefly note, however, that meta-reference is not an exclusively internal strategy. Rather, it adopts a necessarily external (and objective) stance in order to craft an internal (and subjective) critique. Stated simply, while meta-reference is internal to the text itself, its potential for critical commentary may extend beyond the text proper.

Within the relatively brief, yet exhaustive, definition above, Wolf also addresses necessary issues of form, intention, and scope, all contextualized within the larger concept of reflexivity. However, while Wolf devotes particular attention to the issues of intention and reception, upon which I will later elaborate, his discussions of scope and form are comparatively limited. Significantly, Wolf acknowledges the ability of meta-reference to extend beyond the margins of the text. However, as contextualized through Sharon Marie Ross' invitations to tele-participation, the issue of form becomes particularly important to my analysis of the diverse textual manifestations of meta-reference. While Wolf merely refers to the practical usage of the technique through "signs or sign configurations," Ross' model accounts for the varying degrees of transparency engendered by these textual manifestations, as well as the larger implications of their numerous operational forms. As discussed in the introduction, Ross outlines three distinct invitations to tele-participation, overt, organic, and obscured, with my specific focus being on the two latter forms. Whether through organic invitation, a "natural" style that pre-supposes active

viewer participation, or obscured invitation, a "careless" style that requires viewer participation in order to unravel a complex narrative, Ross' model provides a useful context through which to introduce my own categorizations of the practical manifestations of meta-reference.

Four Levels of Textual Manifestation

Seeking to elucidate the varying modes of formal application associated with meta-reference, I assert four distinct levels of categorization to describe the textual manifestations of this technique on television: structural, thematic, verbal, and visual. Like Ross' obscured invitation to tele-participation, the reflexivity of a structural meta-reference resides primarily in the larger narrative construction and content of the show itself. For example, in an episode of *Supernatural* entitled "Ghostfacers," (3:13), the series adopts a different generic and stylistic presentation in order to construct an entire episode around critical commentary on the formal conventions of the series. Structural meta-reference is best illustrated through an analysis of meta-episodes, a discussion of which will follow in the third chapter. The thematic, verbal, and visual modes are each related to Ross' notion of the organic invitation in that their inclusion pre-supposes a level of active viewer comprehension. The thematic level suggests the knowing allusion to a specific text *throughout* the narrative of a given episode. While this level is easily confused with the structural, as the referenced text ultimately serves as a type of narrative foundation, the thematic level is largely distinguished by its intertextuality. In other words, while the structural is inherently internal to the narrative, the thematic is inherently external to the fans, incorporating tangible themes of one text within the diegesis of another in order to craft a distinct form of self-critique. For example, an episode of *30 Rock* entitled "A Goon's Deed in a Weary World" (7:11) employs the use of themes and references from *Willy Wonka & The Chocolate*

Factory (1971) throughout the episode in order to craft a reflexive critique of the series' representation of corporate ownership.

The most common and easily recognizable levels of textual manifestation are the verbal and the visual. Unlike their predecessors, these two categories are particularly self-evident, as the verbal refers to any spoken form of meta-reference, while the visual encapsulates any number of reflexive images, allusions, or jokes that require sight rather than dialogue for their successful conveyance. In other words, the verbal and visual levels essentially refer to any utterance or "sight gag," respectively, that deliberately calls attention to the mediation or established conventions of a given series. An example of the verbal level of categorization appears in a particular line of dialogue from *Arrested Development*. In an episode entitled "Visiting Ours" (1:6), Michael, upon being asked of his previous whereabouts by his son replies, "I had to help out your grandfather and then I had to vow to never help your grandfather again. Pretty much a normal day for me." While this conversation initially seems insignificant, any viewer familiar with the established narrative conventions of the series will recognize Michael's dialogue as an example of verbal meta-reference; a tongue-in-cheek acknowledgement both of his characterization, as well as a recurring storyline. *Arrested Development* also offers a representative example of the visual level of categorization in an episode entitled "Mr. F" (3:5). While discussing the Bluth Company's legal troubles, the family attorney suggests that the room in which they are talking may be bugged for sound. After briefly panning to each family member for their reaction, the camera returns to a shot of the entire room, at the top of which the boom mic is momentarily visible. This flippant nod to the production process is an example of visual meta-reference in that it is not explicitly acknowledged through dialogue, but rather inserted for the recognition of the engaged viewer.

Each of these four levels of practical manifestation provides a necessary context through which to conduct textual analysis and formulate a larger argument regarding reflexive television. However, it is important to note that these distinct modes are not mutually exclusive, as, for example, the thematic level requires both verbal and visual meta-references for its effective usage. Additionally, any categorization such as this one is subject to evolving variations and overlaps, but my research indicates nuances between these strategies that require a form of classification for both practical and clarifying purposes.

Reception and Intention

The larger implications of Wolf's use of the term "non-accidental" as it relates to the issues of intention and reception often associated with reflexive television are highly problematic in nature. Acknowledging the fact that intention is a particularly difficult notion, as it is generally only inferred rather than verified, Wolf suggests that it would be "safer" to argue that meta-reference is non-accidental in that an author is typically thought to be responsible for the meta-referential message. As Wolf states, " … the complexity which metareference implies with its characteristic distinction between a meta- and an object-level, renders it highly probable that actual metaization is the product of an intentional act on the part of an *author*."[5] Importantly, Wolf emphasizes the purposeful role of the author in the construction, and resulting deployment, of meta-reference. Like Wolf, while I recognize the inherent issues associated with authorial intention, the notion of producer awareness of consumer practices is particularly important to my larger argument regarding the function of reflexive television in projecting the highly participatory nature of our current media landscape.

In an article entitled "The Moral Economy of Web 2.0: Audience Research and Convergence Culture," Joshua Green and Henry Jenkins expand upon Jenkins' conceptualization of the impact of digital media on consumer practices first introduced in his influential book, *Convergence Culture*. As Green and Jenkins state,

> …media companies are being forced to reassess the nature of consumer engagement and the value of audience participation in response to a shifting media environment characterized by digitization and the flow of media across multiple platforms, the further fragmentation and diversification of the media market, and the increased power and capacity of consumers to shape the flow and reception of media content.[6]

Here, Green and Jenkins explicate a guiding concept in contemporary media studies: the fact that mass media are increasingly operating within a context of participatory culture engendered by digital media. "As the web has made fan culture more accessible to a larger public and as digital tools have made it easier to perform such activities, a growing proportion of the population now engages in what might once have been described as fannish modes of consumption."[7] These changing terms of participation and consumption are indicative of producer awareness of consumer practices, and perhaps even suggest producers' appropriation of these techniques as a strategy through which to build viewer loyalty. While authorial intention remains inherently speculative, it is not entirely unfounded to argue that the producers of reflexive television are likely not only aware of the highly engaged and media literate viewers comprising their audiences, but are using various meta-techniques in order to actively court such viewers. To be clear, I am not suggesting that producers are aware of the specific viewing habits of any one particular audience member, I simply mean to argue that producers are likely aware that this trend in increasingly active viewing practices are happening on a larger scale. This notion is perhaps best articulated in an article entitled "Reflexivity in Television Depictions of Media

Industries: Peeking Behind the Gilt Curtain," when Brooke E. Duffy, Tara Liss-Mariño, and Katherine Sender state,

> These transformations dovetail with the rise of a convergence culture, in which consumer-audiences are increasingly being integrated into the production processes through nontraditional media and user-generated content. The dissolving boundary between consumer and producer has engendered greater levels of bidirectional transparency – each group is privy to the work of the other – and might account for the recent popularity of [reflexive] television shows…[8]

The ubiquity of convergence culture has fundamentally altered the relationship between media producer and consumer. As digital media continues to foster an open, participatory media environment, the recent proliferation of reflexive television series may, in part, be attributed to producer awareness of consumer practices.

As any discussion of authorial intention suggests, the notion of audience reception is also highly relevant to my study of reflexive television in general, and meta-reference in particular. As I will not be conducting a formal reception study, the same speculative issues associated with intention may also be applied to an analysis of reception, so I will therefore focus on the issue as it is implicated in the textual manifestations of meta-reference. As Wolf states,

> … metareference is not merely a 'message' encoded in a given medium but requires a *recipient* who cognitively realizes it. More precisely, it is not restricted to simple 'givens' within a work (text, artifact or performance): these 'givens' form mere potentials that *may* have meta-effects – but metareference also requires the actualization of such potentials by recipients who are willing and able to cooperate, for it is in the recipient that the most basic function of metareference, the eliciting of a medium-awareness, takes place.[9]

Here, Wolf addresses the significance of reception in the successful transmission of meta-reference, as his acknowledgment of a recipient who is both "willing and able to cooperate" further evokes the changing nature of media consumption that characterizes our contemporary digital age. Just as producers are plausibly aware of the increasingly participatory viewing habits of their audiences, so are they likely to pre-suppose the ability of the viewer to both recognize

and comprehend the reflexive message. However, this theoretical assumption is not to suggest that the various techniques of reflexivity are universally recognized among television audiences. Rather, as Wolf argues, meta-references, and their related techniques, "form mere potentials that *may* have meta-effects." This tension between reception and intention inherent to all reflexive texts is perhaps best encapsulated by describing the function of the various meta-techniques as being purposeful invitations to interpretation that may or may not be effectively actualized by the viewer.

The Internet has become a site for audience participation and creative transparency that has fundamentally changed the relationship between media producer and consumer, opening up for viewer and creator alike a multitude of ways in which to experience watching and making television. In her article "Inside the Box: Accessing Self-Reflexive Television," Julie Levin Russo states, "We watch because television addresses us, hails us as part of its world and attempts to infiltrate our material and subjective experience, not because its products are sealed in the hermetic zone of its producers. And it is often in self-reflexive moments that the interactivity of the medium is particularly apparent."[10] Contextualized through the dual issues of intention and reception, producer awareness of consumer practices facilitated by the transparency of digital media largely contributes to the current ubiquity of reflexive television programming.

Intertextuality

Particularly as it relates to my larger conceptualization of meta-reference, intertextuality is one of the most common techniques used on reflexive television today. In its broadest definition, intertextuality refers to the interrelatedness of media, the notion that all texts are situated in relation to those that precede them, and are therefore referenced by the texts that

follow. While meta-reference focuses on the deliberate self-critique that characterizes reflexive television, intertextuality relies on the use of references to other texts in order to craft its distinctive brand of critical commentary. In their article "Intertextuality: Interpretive Practice and Textual Strategy," Brian Ott and Cameron Walter explain, "… Self-aware references do not caricature another text as [does intertextuality]. Self-reflexive references are often subtle gestures that to be appreciated require specific knowledge of the text's production history, the character's previous credits, or popular reviews."[11] Stated simply, where meta-reference is internal, intertextuality is external. However, this is not to suggest that its exterior focus renders the strategy "non-reflexive." To the contrary, "televisual space is partly defined through a high degree of intertextuality, with television forms constantly commenting upon themselves and other cultural forms, in the process repeatedly foregrounding themselves as acts of mediation."[12] By making these characteristic allusions to other texts, intertextuality both demonstrates the position of a given program among other media texts, while simultaneously reasserting the program's own artificiality in relation to these same texts.

Despite these subtle variations in function, meta-reference and intertextuality are especially comparable in terms of form. In fact, intertextual reference adheres to three of the four levels of textual manifestation outlined above: the thematic, verbal, and visual. As the structural categorization is specifically concerned with self-interpretation and deconstruction, I omit it here in favor of a more thorough discussion of its relation to meta-episodes in chapter three. Like meta-reference, intertextuality largely operates on the verbal level, with representative examples of these utterances frequently appearing on *30 Rock*. In an episode entitled "The Head and the Hair" (1:11), Liz uses an intertextual reference to *Star Wars* in order to explain her reaction to being asked on a date by an attractive colleague. She states, "He looked at me with those crazy

handsome guy eyes, it was like the Death Star tractor beam when the Falcon…" This intertextual reference not only demonstrates Liz's often-fannish characterization, but also illustrates the way in which intertextuality reasserts the mediation of a given program through its relation to other texts. In other words, by invoking another cultural text, Liz calls attention to the constructed nature of the show itself, reminding viewers that they are watching an equally mediated representation. Ultimately, the similarities between meta-reference and intertextuality in terms of formal deployment will provide a useful context to the case studies that follow.

The concept of intertextuality was first introduced by Julia Kristeva as a negotiation of Mikhail Bakhtin's conception of the "dialogic," a literary term that refers to the simultaneous presence, within the body of one work, of two or more intersecting texts which serve to mutually affirm one another. This definition was subsequently expanded upon by Gérard Genette, who theorized that intertextuality was simply the first of many types of what he termed "transtextuality." Genette defines intertextuality as the effective co-presence of two texts, as they specifically manifest themselves in the forms of quotation, plagiarism, or allusion.[13] For the purposes of this study, I will adopt a negotiated approach to the unique conceptualization of intertextuality as outlined by Ott and Walter. Citing the recent proliferation of academic scholarship on the subject, Ott and Walter essentially argue that, in current practice, media scholars employ the use of the term intertextuality to describe two rather different phenomena. They assert that this duality exists between the more traditional conceptualization of Kristeva, who posits intertextuality as an interpretive practice of audiences, and the contemporary notion of intertextuality as textual strategy, in which it is theorized as a stylistic device consciously employed by the producers of media in order to invite a particular audience response. In other words, "intertextuality has come to describe both the general practice of decoding and a specific

strategy of encoding."[14] However, as Ott and Walter argue, media scholars rarely make the distinction between the two. While I dutifully acknowledge the inherent differences between these two conceptualizations of intertextuality, it is here that I adopt a qualified reading of Ott and Walter. I argue that these two distinct theories of intertextuality are not mutually exclusive, but rather suggest a complex interplay between the increasing role of purposeful allusion in television texts as it is contingent on the audience acting as a site of textual production for its effective conveyance; similar to Henry Jenkins' assertions regarding the way in which convergence culture affects this relationship between producer and consumer. Evidently, intertextuality is similarly concerned with issues of reception and intention, as "producers' faith in viewers' savvy understanding of media routines also accounts for the frequency of intertextual references in many of these shows…"[15] Again evoking the notion of producer awareness of consumer practices, intertextual reference suggests a deliberate purpose on the part of the creator, which, in turn, finds its counterpoint in the competent response of the viewer, as no text is read independently of the viewer's prior experience of other texts.[16]

Voiceover Narration and Inside Jokes

Included within my larger conceptualization of meta-reference, both voiceover narration and ongoing or inside jokes are also common techniques employed in reflexive television series. While these two strategies are arguably less complex and nuanced than intertextuality, they are similarly utilized with the purpose of foregrounding both the mediation of a given series, as well as its established formal and narrative conventions. An inheritance from literature and radio, voiceover narration has experienced a long history in the discourses of both film and television. However, within the context of contemporary meta-reference, voiceover narration is used in a

much more self-conscious manner, calling attention to the mediation of a series rather than acting as a practical narrative device. As these two strategies are characterized by differing textual functions and applications, it is important to address why I grouped them together. First, in their consistent and innovative use throughout the series, voiceover narration and inside jokes are especially representative of the unique brand of reflexivity illustrated on *Arrested Development*. Second, and more importantly, these two meta-techniques are common to narratively complex comedies, a concept first introduced by Jason Mittell.

In his article "Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television," Mittell introduces this eponymous term in order to analyze a new form of television storytelling characterized by its use of complicated textual strategies as an alternative to more traditional medium conventions. As he puts it, "… narrative complexity is a redefinition of episodic forms under the influence of serial narration…"[17] In other words, more complex, serialized programs are using television's traditional narrative techniques in order to rebel against episodic conventionality and offer new innovations in programming form. Importantly, while Mittell primarily uses this term to discuss a larger trend in television programming, generally exemplified by hour-long dramas, he does specifically address narratively complex comedies like *Seinfeld*, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, and, of course, *Arrested Development*. As Mittell states, "… within the broader mode of complexity, many programs actively work against serial norms but also embrace narrative strategies to rebel against episodic conventionality."[18] Narratively complex comedies employ the use of various textual devices in order to subvert the conventional assumptions associated with the medium, whether they undermine the return to equilibrium characteristic of sitcoms, destabilize the notion of willing suspension of disbelief, or efface the boundary between real and representation typically established by mediated texts.

Contextualized through Mittell's discussion of narratively complex comedies, reflexive television series use such traditional techniques as voiceover narration and ongoing jokes in order to construct a meta-critique of television itself; formulating a critical commentary on its established forms and conventions, its medium-specific aesthetics and pleasures, and ultimately serving to subvert the expectations of the television audience.

Additionally, the practical use of voiceover narration and inside jokes again evokes the dual issues of reception and intention. Discussing the "operational aesthetic," a term first introduced by Neil Harris, Mittell argues that "… operational reflexivity invites us to care about the storyworld while simultaneously appreciating its construction."[19] Essentially, the operational aesthetic is less concerned with the plot of a given series or episode than it is with its overall narrative formulation. Referring to this concept of operational reflexivity, Mittell states, "There is a degree of self-consciousness in this mode of plotting not only in the explicit reflexivity offered by these programs… but also in the awareness that viewers watch complex programs in part to see 'how will they do it?'"[20] Mittell suggests that the key pleasure for viewers of complex television is an active interpretive process, an unraveling of the operations of narrative mechanics and story structure. As two representative strategies of narratively complex comedies, voiceover narration and inside jokes again reflect the crucial notion of producer awareness of consumer practices.

Case Study: *Arrested Development* (2003-2006, 2013)

Despite low ratings during its brief series run, *Arrested Development* received widespread critical acclaim and has since attracted a devoted cult following; ultimately leading to the release of fourteen new episodes on Netflix in May 2013, seven years after its initial cancellation.

Created by Mitchell Hurwitz, the innovative comedy series follows the story of Michael Bluth (Jason Bateman), the levelheaded, responsible son of a habitually dysfunctional family. After his father, George Sr. (Jeffrey Tambor), is imprisoned for fraudulent accounting practices at the family-owned Bluth Company, Michael is forced to keep his formerly wealthy family together in the face of financial ruin. Characterized by their materialism, selfishness, and often-manipulative actions, Michael's family includes his hypercritical mother, Lucille (Jessica Walter), his spoiled twin sister, Lindsay (Portia de Rossi), his unstable and socially inept younger brother, Buster (Tony Hale), and his older brother, Gob (Will Arnett), a self-absorbed magician. This cast of eccentric characters also includes Michael's well-intentioned son, George Michael (Michael Cera), his rebellious niece, Maeby (Alia Shawkat), and his brother-in-law, Tobias Fünke (David Cross), a discredited former psychiatrist who now aspires to an acting career. Notable for its innovative use of handheld camerawork, archival photos and footage, and voiceover narration (provided by an uncredited Ron Howard), *Arrested Development* is an exemplar of reflexive television in general, and meta-reference in particular.

Following Mittell's concept of narratively complex comedies, *Arrested Development* frequently uses traditional narrative strategies in order to rebel against episodic conventionality, which is perhaps most evident in the show's mixed relationship with serial plotting. While the narratives of individual episodes are largely self-contained, the series does feature ongoing storylines, including George Michael's crush on Maeby and Tobias' struggle with his "never-nude" disorder, to name a couple. However, these story arcs function primarily to offer backstory for ongoing jokes and self-aware references. As Mittell states,

> Complexity, especially in comedies, works against [traditional] norms by altering the relationship between multiple plotlines, creating interweaving stories that often collide and coincide… Such interwoven plotting has been adopted and expanded by… *Arrested*

> *Development*, extending the coincidences and collisions across episodes in a way that transforms serial narrative into elaborate inside jokes…[21]

While the series includes an abundance of running gags, with Tobias' possible homosexuality, the chicken dance, and life lessons from J. Walter Weatherman being of particular note, the show's deliberate foreshadowing of Buster losing his hand in a seal attack offers the best example of meta-reference. Subtle allusions to the accident begin as early as the first season when, in an episode entitled "Whistler's Mother" (1:20), Buster casually states that a family party is going to be "off the hook." More explicit references to the attack follow in later episodes, with Buster winning a stuffed seal in a claw machine game, sitting on a bench obscuring an advertisement so that it reads "Arm Off," and finally, in an episode entitled "Amigos" (2:3), Buster, upon seeing his favorite hand-shaped chair again, after Lucille had previously given it to the family housekeeper, states, "Wow, I never thought I'd miss a hand so much." Exemplifying the altered relationship between multiple plotlines discussed by Mittell above, the ongoing story arcs of Buster's enlistment in the Army and Gob's release of the seal back into the wild ultimately converge in the dramatic loss of Buster's hand in an episode aptly entitled, "Hand to God" (2:12). Despite its textual application largely relying on the verbal and visual, this story arc is a long-term example of the thematic level, as these allusions to future events effectively act as a setup to a complex reflexive message. In other words, these numerous foreshadowing references, in addition to the interweaving plotlines of Buster and Gob, essentially serve as backstory to an elaborate, meta-referential inside joke. This storyline is an example of meta-reference not only in its self-conscious acknowledgment of series conventions, but also in its absolute reliance on audiences' extended engagement with the show. While it is important to note that general narrative comprehension is not dependent on long-term engagement, the effective comprehension of this particular example of meta-reference is

dependent on a viewer's pre-existing knowledge of these ongoing references and storylines. Through an extended setup across multiple levels of textual manifestation, namely verbal and visual, this particular inside joke exemplifies meta-reference in its foregrounding of the series' established narrative and aesthetic conventions.

Again illustrating its use of traditional narrative practices in order to subvert televisual conventionality, *Arrested Development* frequently employs the use of executive producer Ron Howard's voiceover narration in order to craft a reflexive message. As Mittell states, "Complex narration often breaks the fourth wall, whether it be visually represented direct address or more ambiguous voice-over that blurs the line between diegetic and nondiegetic, calling attention to its own breaking of convention."[22] Generally operating on the thematic level through the use of verbal utterances, Howard's voiceover lends a distinct personality to the storytelling that often includes explicit instances of meta-reference. This effacement of the boundary between diegetic and nondiegetic narration is perhaps no more evident than in an example from an episode entitled, "Forget Me Now" (3:3). Michael, addressing his date's complaint that all the men she meets find the stupidest things funny, states, "Yeah, that's a cultural problem, is what it is. You know, you're average American male is in a perpetual state of adolescence, you know, arrested development." To which the narrator cheerfully replies, "Hey, that's the name of this show!" This is an especially illustrative example in the sense that it simultaneously calls attention to the series' breaking of narrative convention, while also foregrounding its highly mediated nature.

Significantly, a number of the instances of meta-reference involving voiceover narration on the show rely on Howard's own celebrity, explicitly addressing the knowledge of the audience regarding his persona and previous roles. For example, in an episode entitled "Public Relations" (1:11), George Michael is having a conversation with Jessie, the family's publicist

and Michael's newest romantic interest. After being dumped by Michael due to his devotion to his son, a vengeful Jessie accuses George Michael of sabotaging his father's happiness, saying, "Daddy lost his shot at happy and it's all your fault, Opie." To which the narrator angrily responds, "Jessie had gone too far and she had best watch her mouth." To the uninitiated viewer, a comment such as this one would merely be naturalized, a simple response to an insult directed at a main character. However, Howard's narration, or more specifically, his response to Jessie, is a direct meta-reference to his famous childhood role as Opie Taylor on *The Andy Griffith Show*, a role that is again referenced in a later episode, "For British Eyes Only" (3:2), when the narrator states, "No one was making fun of Andy Griffith. I can't emphasize that enough." These two thematic examples are both highly meta-referential, offering explicit commentary on Howard's celebrity, as well as being intertextual in nature, ultimately referring to an outside media text in a particularly complex manner; as viewers must be familiar not only with the established series conventions of *Arrested Development*, particularly Howard's involvement with the show, but also his public persona and previous roles in order to effectively comprehend the reflexive message.

Through its frequent use of meta-references, many of them intertextual in nature, *Arrested Development* consistently offers critical commentary both on the series itself, as well as on outside media texts. In other words, intertextual references function to position the television text in relation to other cultural forms, ultimately foregrounding the series as an act of mediation in the process. A complex example of intertextuality emerges in an episode entitled "Sword of Destiny" (2:15). Upon experiencing pain in his abdomen, Michael is immediately rushed to the hospital to be treated by yet another inept doctor (an ongoing joke on the series). Importantly, Dan Castellaneta, the voice of Homer Simpson on FOX's hugely popular *The Simpsons*, portrays

the doctor. Following up with Michael, Dr. Stein calmly states, "Well, the operation went pretty smoothly, but once I got in there, the appendix wasn't so inflamed. D'oh." Lucille immediately points to Dr. Stein, saying, "I knew it!" Distinctly operating on the visual level, this example of intertextual meta-reference is particularly significant in its multi-layered complexity. First, like Howard's narration, viewers must be familiar with Castellaneta's role on *The Simpsons* in order to effectively comprehend the verbal reference to Homer's catchphrase. Second, this example serves as a purposeful acknowledgment of crossover fan bases, as viewers of *Arrested Development* are likely to watch *The Simpsons* due to their similarities in themes and humor, as well as network. Third, this example is particularly illuminating in terms of reception, as Lucille effectively acts as an audience proxy. By immediately replying, "I knew it," Lucille ostensibly echoes the intended reaction of the informed viewer. As an example of intertextuality, this scene illustrates the function of meta-reference to position the text in relation to other cultural forms, ultimately revealing its mediated nature by demonstrating that position on multiple levels.

While ongoing jokes, voiceover narration, and intertextuality are consistently employed on *Arrested Development* with the purpose of conveying a meta-referential message, the series is particularly effective in formulating critical commentary regarding its poor ratings. An especially introverted form of self-critique, the show was highly transparent in dealing with these issues, diegetically addressing network pressure, programming cuts, and their need to attract a larger viewership. "Sword of Destiny" provides another relevant example of meta-reference in its direct critique of programming cuts imposed on the show by FOX. At the opening of the episode, the narrator explains, "Michael Bluth had just been stunned to discover that a contract his company was counting on was being cut back," after which Michael states, "You initially told us to design and build twenty-two homes and now you're saying eighteen. That doesn't give us enough

capital to complete the job and we've already got the blueprints drawn up and everything." Here, Michael is specifically referring to programming cuts imposed on the series between its three seasons, as the number of episodes per season progressively decreased from twenty-two, to eighteen, and finally, to thirteen. In this instance, the show's transparency offers a rather sophisticated meta-referential message, creating both a self-critique of their failure to attract a larger audience, but also a meta-critique of unreasonable industry standards and expectations.

Conclusion

A broad term encompassing various narrative techniques, meta-reference is one of the most common and recognizable strategies employed on contemporary reflexive television. Operating across multiple levels of textual manifestation, meta-reference deliberately calls attention to the mediated nature of reflexive television programming, ultimately serving to foreground both the artifice, as well as the established aesthetic and narrative conventions of a given series. Whether through intertextuality, voiceover narration, or inside jokes, meta-reference employs the use of different textual devices in order to form a deliberate self-critique, offering critical commentary on the various elements that comprise the unique storyworld of the series. Additionally, facilitated by the increasingly open and participatory nature of digital media, producer awareness of consumer practices reflects the larger implications of intention and reception associated with reflexive television, as "self-reflexivity is often considered to be television's quintessential form of address, constantly [referring] back to its own formal, narrative, and institutional discourses."[23] Stated simply, reflexive television purposefully places an expectation on the viewer first in terms of recognition and then of comprehension. Through

the deployment of meta-reference as a recognizable element of narrative, television producers both parallel and project the types of active audience engagement facilitated by digital media.

Chapter Two: Meta-Production

Often associated with the commercial side of the medium, meta-production is an increasingly common device employed by contemporary reflexive television series. Like meta-reference, this technique is critical in nature and uses various textual strategies in order to call attention to the mediation of television programming. However, where meta-reference foregrounds the artifice of a given series primarily through self-critique, meta-production deliberately reveals the various technical, industrial, and commercial aspects of the television medium. In other words, meta-production is distinguished from meta-reference through its specificity. While meta-reference refers to a more general process of self-analysis, encapsulating any allusion that deliberately calls attention to the mediation of the television text, meta-production more specifically refers to knowing references to the production context of a given show. Additionally, meta-production often differs from meta-reference in its textual applications. While it similarly operates on the verbal and visual levels, meta-production is often extra-diegetic, extending its reflexive message beyond the boundaries of the text in order to comment upon larger social and commercial issues. This is in direct contrast to meta-reference, which – despite often extending its critical commentary beyond the text proper – is exclusively diegetic. Stated simply, meta-production is characterized by knowing references to the production process, ultimately serving to comment upon broader contextual issues. In this chapter, I will analyze the concept of meta-production as it operates on reflexive television series, focusing much of my analysis on *30 Rock* (2006-2013) as an illustrative case study. Employing the use of such techniques as knowing product placement and direct address, meta-production purposefully addresses the television production process, ultimately calling attention to a given program's status as a textual construct.

In addition, just as meta-production deliberately foregrounds the production process, so does it invite viewers to recognize an inherent critical commentary and reflexivity characteristic of these meta-references. Again suggesting the importance of reception and intention as they relate to reflexive television, meta-production offers knowing allusions to the production process, which serve to convey critical messages that may or may not be effectively actualized by the viewer. It is important to briefly note that overall narrative comprehension is not dependent on the viewer's understanding of meta-production, but rather that the critical function of this strategy relies entirely on audiences' interpretation of the reflexive message. In other words, if the viewer does not understand the intended parodic function of the reference, the underlying commercial imperative will simply be actualized. Furthermore, I will address the commercial issues typically associated with meta-production, and more specifically, with product placement, as television series that knowingly incorporate this sometime reflexive strategy evoke the tension between meta-production as a commercial device and its potential for greater media democratization. Like the criticism associated with reflexive television in general, meta-production has the potential to be a particularly insidious process, as it often functions to invite, and subsequently appropriate the types of active audience engagement engendered by the Internet in order to garner more viewers; a notion on which I will later elaborate. I will ultimately illustrate how meta-production, when knowingly addressed by producers, functions to reveal the artifice of a given program through purposeful, often-parodic references to the production process; ultimately placing an expectation on the viewer in terms of both recognition and interpretation of these critical reflexive messages.

Like all reflexive techniques, meta-production serves to purposefully deconstruct the boundary between mediated representation and unmediated reality typically established by works

of fiction. Brooke E. Duffy, Tara Liss-Mariño, and Katherine Sender further elucidate by stating, "These tropes of reflexivity purport to shatter the illusion of transparent representation popular in mainstream media; narratives that are highly reflexive foreground their own production and call attention to their status as textual constructs."[1] In other words, through the use of such related strategies as product placement and direct address, television series that incorporate meta-production deliberately break with traditional conventions regarding seamless representation and the suspension of disbelief. Televisual meta-production is defined by its use of various reflexive techniques that serve to convey knowing references to the production process, whether commercial, industrial, or technical, ultimately foregrounding the artifice of a given series.

Significantly, this deliberate revelation of production processes also indicates a mode of media democratization, a reformation movement that advocates a mass media system that not only informs and empowers all members of society, but also serves to promote democratic values. As Duffy, Liss-Mariño, and Sender further explain, "Reflexivity makes a stylistic virtue of revealing 'behind-the-scenes' processes to audiences… Such reflexivity seems to promise audience empowerment by making explicit the ways in which media texts are constructed."[2] The evident transparency with which reflexive television series refer to their production processes suggests the emphasis on the individual viewer that defines media democratization; a viewer that is both informed and empowered by this characteristic openness and accountability. While I do not mean to suggest that this promised empowerment will be destabilizing to the entrenched corporate control that production companies have over the television industry, it does indicate a fundamental shift in the relationship between media producer and consumer. An implicit result of reflexive television programming in general is that viewers may begin to acquire a degree of critical awareness toward reflexive practice, allowing audiences to develop a more industry-

aware, self-conscious reading formation. In other words, as viewers become increasingly familiar with the narrative strategies that comprise televisual reflexivity, they are better equipped to comprehend and interpret these sophisticated strategies in a meaningful, and perhaps sometimes resistant, manner. This potential for empowerment is especially important as it relates to meta-production, as it suggests that contemporary audiences are more likely to understand the critical nature of these reflexive references, ultimately subverting their underlying commercial function.

Again employing the use of Werner Wolf's conceptualization of meta-references forming "potentials" for active interpretation among viewers, this general focus on the audience is particularly evident when considered in relation to reception and intention. Importantly, just as meta-references form potentials that may or may not be effectively actualized by audience members, so do allusions to the production process place an expectation on the viewer as it relates to the recognition and interpretation of the reflexive message. This interpretive process is inherently entwined with the notion of the dissolving boundary between unmediated reality and mediated representation. In her article "Self-Referentiality in Art: A Look at Three Television Situation Comedies of the 1950s," Joann Gardner examines this notion as it appeared on early examples of reflexive television series. Referring to the fictional universe contained within the television screen, Gardner states,

> We gaze into, and occasionally become, spiritually or emotionally involved in this world, but are not allowed to violate it physically… Once the inhabitants of the artistic presentation violate it (stepping to the proscenium, addressing the audience or gazing directly at it), boundaries fade or disappear, we become part of the presentation…[3]

Specifically referring to direct address and a concept that is popularly referred to as "breaking the fourth wall," Gardner indicates the ability of reflexive television to not only acknowledge its audience, but to invite viewers to become part of the presentation. Put simply, because televisual reflexivity is an increasingly common form of audience address, it necessarily evokes the issues

of reception and intention typically associated with reflexive television programming. In fact, the purposeful use of meta-production again suggests the notion of producer awareness of consumer practices, as digital media has fundamentally altered the terms of contemporary audience engagement. Largely facilitated through the Internet, the increasingly visible nature of active consumption practices indicates the likelihood that producers are aware of these participatory viewing habits; and are therefore likely to pre-suppose the ability of the viewer to both recognize and comprehend the reflexive message. As Duffy, Liss-Mariño, and Sender state, "Ironic reflexivity about production processes and audience appeals is one way that fictional shows about media industries court savvy audiences presented with seemingly infinite media options."[4] By inviting viewers to become part of the presentation through the diegetic recognition of their knowledge of production practices, meta-production not only effaces the boundary between mediated and unmediated, but also suggests the significance of producer awareness of consumer practices in the successful deployment of reflexive messages.

Commercial Concerns

Despite the highly transparent and critical manner in which reflexive television employs the use of meta-production, it is important to note that scholars like Mimi White "problematize this celebration of media democratization as representing more a commercial strategy than consumer empowerment."[5] Where I assert the potential of televisual reflexivity to reflect the interests of an increasingly participatory and media literate viewer, some theorists argue that television's often "self-congratulatory" use of reflexivity in fact serves the economic interests of the media industry by rewarding viewers with the unique pleasures of their own knowledge and

media savvy. In her article "Crossing Wavelengths: The Diegetic and Referential Imaginary of American Commercial Television," White further explains,

> … It is almost impossible to watch television without being referred to other aspects of the medium in some way… This is one of the mechanisms that promotes extended viewing by offering the comfort and rewards of familiarity to the consistent watcher. In this sense, regular television viewers are the "best" viewers, capable of deriving the greatest potential satisfaction from any single show because they are in the advantageous position of understanding the rules of the game.[6]

In other words, White argues that the transparency of reflexive television does not suggest informative or empowering properties, but rather indicates its ability to create consumers precisely by continually rewarding their highly active and engaged viewing habits. These issues regarding the commerciality and consumption of reflexive television are particularly evident in the context of product placement. Referring to the current economic state of the television industry, Nussbaum states, "Characters are designed as shills or consumers from day one. Shows themselves are brands, actors are brands, and so are songs and sodas…"[7] Much like White, rather than recognizing the critical possibilities of parodic allusions to branded entertainment, Nussbaum merely asserts the ubiquity and inevitability of the practice.

In his canonical *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, Henry Jenkins examines the increasing effects of digital technologies on traditional platforms, largely focusing on the relationship between media convergence and participatory culture. While he does address the ways in which participatory culture increasingly positions media producers and consumers as interrelated participants rather than occupying completely separate roles, Jenkins concludes that "not all participants are created equal. Corporations… still exert greater power than any individual consumer or even the aggregate of consumers."[8] Despite his focus on the changing nature of media consumption, Jenkins ultimately reasserts the corporate control of the media industries, indicating that the use of product placement, whether reflexive or not, is

perhaps more insidious than it is democratizing. In fact, further echoing White's assertions, Jenkins argues that in some cases, corporations are using media convergence in order to shape consumer behavior. As Jenkins states,

> Media industries are embracing convergence for a number of reasons: because convergence-based strategies exploit the advantages of media conglomeration; because convergence creates multiple ways of selling content to consumers; because convergence cements consumer loyalty at a time when the fragmentation of the marketplace… threatens old ways of doing business.[9]

While Jenkins is specifically referring to the concept of media convergence, his assertions are nonetheless relevant to the criticism surrounding meta-production. Focusing on the underlying economic concerns that drive the spread of media convergence, Jenkins asserts the exploitative potential of greater media democratization, as media corporations are using televisual strategies like reflexive product placement and direct address to build viewer loyalty and find new ways of selling content to consumers.

Although I certainly recognize the validity of such assertions, I argue that the purposeful transparency of reflexive television has the potential to influence greater media democratization, as well as continue to reflect the increasingly participatory nature of our current media landscape. For instance, while Jenkins first asserts the ways in which media corporations are exploiting convergence for economic reasons, he also points to its empowering possibilities. He states, "… Convergence is [also] being pushed by consumers who are demanding that media companies be more responsive to their tastes and interests… Whatever its motivations, convergence is changing the ways in which media industries operate and the ways average people think about their relation to media."[10] Participatory culture encapsulates these changing attitudes of media producer and consumer alike, suggesting that the textual strategies of reflexive television will likely continue to encourage greater interactivity and democratization. As

evidenced by the discussion of reception and intention above, the various techniques of meta-production, most notably direct address, largely serve as overt acknowledgments of the viewing audience, ultimately illustrating the deliberate openness of reflexive television in its treatment of the production process. It is important to note that product placement differs from direct address in the sense that it is inarguably a commercial strategy. However, while the intention behind product integration is generally financial, reflexive television's knowing use of the practice typically positions product placement as an object of ridicule, offering parodies of the current ubiquity of branded entertainment within the industry. The characteristically candid nature of these parodies is perhaps best encapsulated by Tina Fey, who states, "'We called [our deal] out really hard to let people know. If it's a commercial, you're going to know it's a commercial.'"[11] Once again, as product placement is reflexive only if knowingly addressed by producers, its commercial intentions are arguably eclipsed by its highly critical and parodic treatment. In other words, within the specific context of reflexive television, product integration is so obviously positioned as a commercial strategy, perhaps even a necessary evil, that it is likely only to be understood as parody. The evident transparency with which reflexive television series consistently refer to their production processes ultimately suggests the emphasis on the viewer that characterizes media democratization; a viewer that is both informed and empowered by this deliberate openness and accountability.

Product Placement

Alternately referred to as product integration and branded entertainment, product placement is one of the more common tropes currently found on television. Like reflexivity in general, as product integration first appeared on film, there is comparatively little scholarship on

televisual product placement as related to its cinematic predecessor. Defined by the reference to or inclusion of branded products within the diegesis of a given program, product placement dates back to the earliest days of the medium; the quintessential example being the sponsorship of soap operas by laundry detergent companies, hence their name. However, as television's cultural and technological contexts began to evolve, the implementation of product placement necessarily followed suit. Gradually falling out of use in favor of thirty-second spots during program breaks, the practice was drastically affected by the advent of both VCR and DVR technology, as viewers were finally presented with the option of skipping commercial breaks. Additionally, the introduction of computers, smart phones, tablets, and numerous other digital technologies fundamentally altered the nature of audience engagement and viewing habits. In their article "Ad Nauseum," Jennifer Armstrong, Lindsay Soll, and Tanner Stransky quote Adonis Hoffman, senior vice president of the American Association of Advertising Agencies, who explains, "'When audiences are multitasking – viewing a program, texting, surfing the Web – it leaves little room for an advertiser to narrow in… If you can somehow get into their stream of consciousness – that seems to be the intent.'"[12] As television competes with various digital technologies for audience attention, the implementation of product placement continues to evolve; characters are no longer depicted as simply using these products, as specific brands are now mentioned in dialogue and even woven into entire storylines. For example, an episode of *Community* entitled "Basic Rocket Science" (2:4) forms its entire narrative around product placement for KFC. The episode depicts the study group onboard a space simulator sponsored by the fast food restaurant, which is called the "Kentucky Fried Chicken Eleven Herbs & Space Experience." Furthermore, the effect of reality television on the textual application of product placement should not be underestimated. As a genre, reality television is predicated upon the

strategy of integrated sponsorship, as the "real-life" subjects of these shows effectively become spokespeople for the branded products that they are consistently seen using, consuming, and wearing. Reality television has not only made the use of product integration more widespread, it has also reinforced its effectiveness as a commercial strategy across fictional and nonfictional texts alike. In response to both the variable history of product placement, as well as the steady rise in popularity of reality television, contemporary programming operates in a new age of television economics; one increasingly characterized by the pervasiveness of branded entertainment.

However, it is important to note that televisual product placement is reflexive only if knowingly addressed by producers, as the vast majority of integrated sponsorship is simply naturalized within the diegesis of a given series. In fact, in these instances, the viewer is meant to be unaware of whether the use of a branded product is a paid endorsement or not, as brands are seamlessly woven into the plot of a given episode. A current example of a series that consistently – and in its unique case, necessarily – uses product placement is AMC's immensely popular *Mad Men* (2007-), a program that has featured numerous branded products, notably including Heineken, Kodak, and Utz potato chips. As the show's creator and head writer, Matthew Weiner, explains, "'People hate product placement… But to do a show about an advertising agency without products or to do a show that's about real life where you don't see the products… that's even more embarrassing. We're creating a texture of real life.'"[13] As Weiner suggests, integrated sponsorship is often employed in service to realism and authenticity, as, in the specific case of *Mad Men*, an ad agency without branded clients would simply be unrealistic. Additionally, the use of naturalistic product placement largely allows producers to avoid the stigma typically associated with the practice, as it is often charged with undermining artistic integrity. As Duffy,

Liss-Mariño, and Sender state, "By attributing the use of branded products to virtue or realism, rather than revenue generation for the production company… writers and producers [reassert] their autonomy and commitment to an authentic (that is, nonsponsored) creative product."[14] Despite its stigmatization and generally naturalistic usage, product placement is often employed by reflexive television series, which provide explicit examples of meta-production.

The use of product placement on reflexive programs is largely distinguished by its blatant transparency. Perhaps due to its stigmatization, product placement does not operate on the structural level of textual manifestation, as devoting an entire episode to this strategy would likely undermine its critical function and alienate viewers. For similar reasons, product integration does not often adopt the thematic application. Rather, reflexive product placement typically combines both the verbal and visual levels of textual application, revealing itself through non-naturalistic dialogue and overt – although diegetically unacknowledged – visual cues. In her article "What Tina Fey Would Do For a SoyJoy," Emily Nussbaum explains, "On most TV series, brands are woven indiscernibly into each plot twist – while on others they are referenced openly, with tremendous finesse…"[15] As the successful conveyance of their critical message relies on the recognition and comprehension of the viewer, reflexive television series are necessarily explicit in their treatment of product placement. While the majority of shows passively acknowledge product placement as an increasingly common industrial strategy, reflexive television programs actively address the underlying commercial concerns of product placement in a highly critical and parodic manner.

This necessarily critical function in the reflexive treatment of product placement generally manifests itself in a parody of both the overtly commercial nature of the practice, as well as its current ubiquity and necessity within the industry as a whole. As contextualized

through its association with parody, humor is often an important tool through which to convey this critique and analysis. As Simon Dentith argues, "[Parody] need not be funny, yet it works better if it is, because laughter… helps it secure its point."[16] Despite the apparent superficiality of humor, its use within the context of reflexive television is highly effective in conveying its critical message, as laughter serves as a form of powerful, collective public rebuke. Dentith continues by stating, "One of the typical ways in which parody works is to seize on particular aspects of a manner or style and exaggerate it to ludicrous effect. There is an evident critical function in this, as the act of parody must first involve identifying a characteristic stylistic habit or mannerism and then making it comically visible."[17] Because product placement is reflexive only if knowingly addressed by producers, it is highly representative of the critical function asserted by Dentith. Producers must first engage in this process of identifying a common stylistic habit in order to humorously exaggerate it through parodic allusion to the production process.

30 Rock offers numerous cases of reflexive product placement, with a particularly illustrative example in an episode entitled "Audition Day" (4:4). Ostracized by his peers due to a case of bed bugs, Jack is forced to conduct a meeting using equipment from Cisco, a popular video conferencing company. Upon being asked by a colleague whether he likes the services provided by Cisco, Jack replies, "Of course. It continues to be the gold standard by which all business technology is judged. Cisco: The human network." The absurdly artificial nature of Jack's dialogue – including his direct vocalization of Cisco's tagline – illustrates the characteristic transparency of reflexive product integration. Furthermore, referring to Tina Fey, creator, writer, and star of *30 Rock*, Brian Steinberg states, "Where many producers stick products in shows in a way that is obvious and intrusive, and yet fail to acknowledge that breach of faith between program and viewer, [Fey] has been instrumental in admitting that business is in

fact getting done…"[18] Knowingly addressed by producers like Fey, and a common technique of meta-production, product integration is reflexive both in its overt revelation of the artifice of television programming, as well as its parodic allusion to the medium's current industrial context, one that is increasingly characterized by the ubiquity of branded entertainment.

Direct Address

Often specifically combined with product placement, direct address is a distinctly extra-diegetic strategy of meta-production commonly employed by reflexive television series. Largely the product of early programs like *The Milton Berle Show* and *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show*, direct address describes occasions in which fictional characters speak directly to their audience. It is this explicit mode of openness that defines direct address as an extra-diegetic reflexive technique, as the temporary erasure of the boundary between character and audience blatantly disrupts continuity, effectively taking both performer and viewer "out" of the narrative. Stated simply, the generally brief textual manifestations of direct address seem to exist outside of the diegetic narrative. Traditionally associated with live performance, televisual direct address now refers to these instances in which characters look and/or speak directly into camera, and is often designated as "breaking the fourth wall." As Duffy, Liss-Mariño, and Sender further elucidate, "Actors talk directly through the fourth wall; by drawing attention to its artifice, they trump the appearance of realism (actors pretending the audience isn't watching) with the realism of representation (actors acknowledge that audiences are or will be watching)."[19] In other words, through its acknowledgment of the camera's presence, direct address effaces the boundary between mediated representation and unmediated reality, not only disrupting the established suspension of disbelief, but also serving to explicitly foreground the artifice of the series. Again

through its conspicuous recognition of the television camera, direct address also provides a particularly illustrative example of meta-production in its knowing reference to the technical aspects of the production process.

Like its periodic use of product integration, *30 Rock* also offers numerous representative examples of direct address. In an episode entitled "SeinfeldVision" (2:1), Jack develops this eponymous programming strategy in order to digitally insert footage of Jerry Seinfeld from his hit show, *Seinfeld*, into other NBC series, including *ER*, *Friends*, and the fictional *MILF Island*. It is soon revealed that Jack has implemented SeinfeldVision without its namesake's permission, ultimately leading them to a confrontation in Jack's office. Jack begins the negotiation by saying, "All right, listen, Seinfeld. I'll give you one million dollars and five free commercials for your animated feature *Bee Movie*, and you let me run [SeinfeldVision] for one week," to which Seinfeld quickly responds, "Two million dollars to the charity of my choice, ten free commercials for *Bee Movie*—" and, looking directly into the camera, he concludes, "—opening November second." This example illustrates the use of direct address in the implementation of product placement, as Seinfeld not only directly acknowledges the audience, but also promotes his upcoming film. The exchange also demonstrates the implicit function of direct address to disrupt narrative cohesion, as Seinfeld's abrupt acknowledgment of the television camera reasserts the artificiality of the presentation, purposefully obscuring the boundary between mediated and unmediated.

Case Study: *30 Rock* (2006-2013)

Much like *Arrested Development*, *30 Rock* was an enormous critical success during its seven seasons, but never achieved the same level of popular recognition. Loosely based on Fey's

experiences as head writer for *Saturday Night Live*, the show takes place behind the scenes of a fictional NBC sketch comedy program entitled *TGS with Tracy Jordan*. The narrative largely follows the friendship between the neurotic, food-obsessed, and perpetually single head writer of *TGS*, Liz Lemon (Fey), and her charming, decisive network executive boss, Jack Donaghy (Alec Baldwin). However, *30 Rock* is also host to a cast of eccentric supporting characters, including the absurdly vain and self-involved stars of *TGS*, Tracy Jordan (Tracy Morgan) and Jenna Maroney (Jane Krakowski), the cheerfully obedient NBC page, Kenneth Parcell (Jack McBrayer), and finally, Liz's co-writer and trusted friend, Pete Hornberger (Scott Adsit). While the series largely operates according to traditional sitcom standards, "… half the pleasure of [*30 Rock*] is its dazzling self-referentiality, the way it acts as an allegory for what it's like to make TV right now."[20] *30 Rock* is an exemplar of reflexive television, as it is highly self-referential in its deliberate acknowledgment of cultural, industrial, and commercial contexts, as well as its own established series conventions.

30 Rock provides a particularly illustrative example of meta-production in that its narrative revolves around the production of a fictional television show for an actual television network, NBC. In fact, the very title of the series refers to 30 Rockefeller Plaza in New York City, the location of both the actual NBC offices, as well as those for the staff of the fictional *TGS*. Due to this industry setting, the show often incorporates everyday aspects of the production process into the plot, including script rewrites, rehearsals, and last-minute costume changes. Additionally, in a distinctly reflexive style, characters from *30 Rock* occasionally interact with other NBC employees, including Brian Williams and Conan O'Brien, who are ultimately playing exaggerated versions of themselves. The show is also highly reflexive regarding issues of corporate ownership, often incorporating references to this particular context through Jack, a

corporate executive whose official title is Vice President of East Coast Television and Microwave Oven Programming.

Largely through storylines involving Jack, *30 Rock* consistently parodies the larger implications of corporate ownership, an example of which emerges in an episode entitled "The Rural Juror" (1:10). At the opening of the episode, Tracy informs Jack that he needs $100,000 or else he's going to lose both of his houses. Jack, ever the savvy businessman, suggests that Tracy brand himself by marketing a consumer product. Tracy later comes up with the idea for a portable grill that replaces "pesky" sandwich bread entirely with meat. Telling Jack of his idea, Tracy asks, "So GE will produce the Tracy Jordan Meat Machine?" To which Jack responds, "Oh no, no. GE could never make anything so, um… unique. We'll have to pass this off to one of our subsidiaries." Jack then proceeds to reveal a complicated flow chart (illustration 2.1) that outlines all of GE's many subsidiaries, showing NBC to be toward the bottom of the "Domestic Appliance" division and displaying its actual owners as the Sheinhardt Wig Company. The chart essentially serves as a parodic exaggeration of corporate structure and transindustrial ownership, an increasingly prevalent concept explored by Robert W. McChesney in his article "The New Global Media: It's a Small World of Big Conglomerates." Citing such factors as the deregulation of media ownership and the privatization of television in global markets, McChesney argues that it is now possible for media conglomerates to establish powerful distribution and production networks within and among nations. Significantly, listed first by McChesney among these eight transnational corporations that currently dominate media in the United States is General Electric. Reflecting issues diegetically addressed on *30 Rock*, McChesney states, "… Even more striking has been the vertical integration of the global media market, with the same firms gaining ownership of content and the means to distribute it. What distinguishes the dominant firms is

their ability to exploit the 'synergy' among the companies they own."[21] The preceding example of meta-production directly reflects McChesney's assertions, as GE is not only an example of a vertically integrated media corporation, but also because Jack exploits the transindustrial corporate structure of GE in order to produce Tracy's product. Especially within the context of McChesney's analysis, this example represents the series' generally humorous and parodic attitude toward its own corporate ownership, illustrating a reflexive reference to its production context, as well as parodying larger issues currently affecting the media industries.

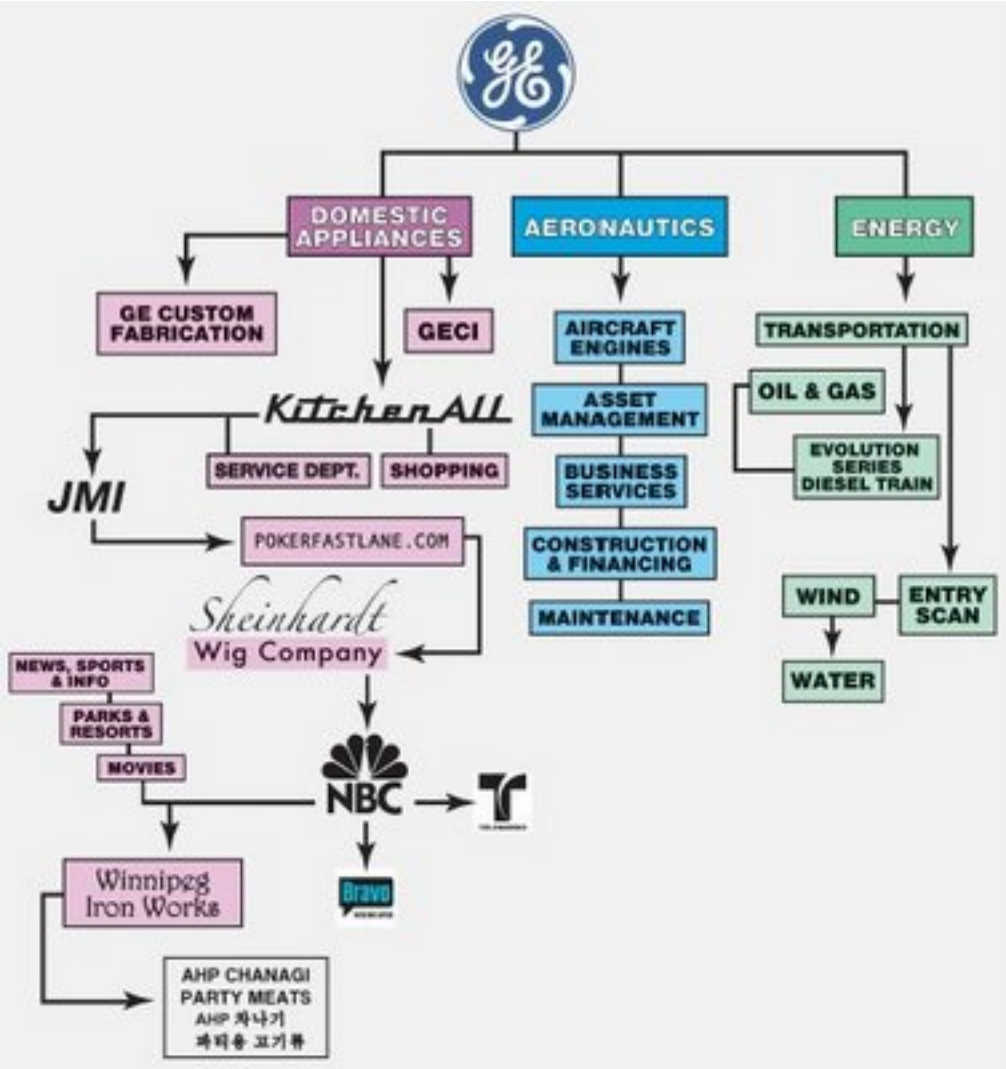

Illustration 2.1 Flow chart illustrating the fictional subsidiaries of General Electric (GE), as it appears on *30 Rock*.

While *30 Rock* is particularly notable for its highly self-referential allusions to corporate ownership, its use of the various techniques of meta-production is perhaps most visible in the series' treatment of branded entertainment. In fact, the program's most memorable, and blatant, use of direct address is combined with an instance of product integration. In an episode entitled "Somebody to Love" (2:6), Jack accidentally grabs a phone belonging to an acquaintance, explaining the mix-up by saying, "These Verizon Wireless phones are just so popular…" to which Liz responds, "Well, sure, because that Verizon Wireless service is just unbeatable. I mean, if I saw a phone like that on TV, I would be like, 'Where is my nearest retailer so I can get one?'" Then, looking directly into the camera, Liz asks, "Can we have our money now?" As discussed by Fey above, *30 Rock* is intentional in its blatant acknowledgment of product placement, as its producers are adamant about wanting their viewers to know they are watching a commercial. This notion is even further supported through the use of direct address, as Liz is speaking directly to the audience, essentially telling them that they are watching an advertisement. As Duffy, Liss-Mariño, and Sender state, "Although the [show] can be seen as reflexive in acknowledging advertiser pressure and product placement, these are folded into a larger ironic nod to the audience: we all know this is a money-making enterprise and will not attempt to dupe you into believing otherwise."[22] Through the deliberate use of direct address, producers are ostensibly acknowledging their audiences' savvy understanding of production processes and branded entertainment.

In its consistent use of various reflexive techniques, *30 Rock* is an exemplar of meta-production, which is perhaps no more evident than in "Jack-Tor" (1:5), the episode the series devotes entirely to the issue of product integration, therefore offering a rare example of meta-production that operates on the thematic level of textual manifestation. Itself both a

representative example of product placement, as well as an overt critique of the practice, the episode offers a meta-commentary on the textual implications, stigmatization, and current state of product integration within the television industry. The episode begins with the writers of *TGS* watching a brief instructional video produced by GE, in which Jack explains a new synergy that is "revolutionizing the way we monetize broadcast television": product integration. Jack states, "How does it work? Simple. All you have to do as the writing staff of an NBC show is incorporate positive mentions, or 'pos-mens,' of GE products into your program." The video is immediately indicative of meta-production, as it not only references the effects of corporate ownership on the creative process, but also seemingly addresses the audience in its candid explanation of product integration. In other words, if viewers were previously unaware of the commercial practice, they are now as informed as the *TGS* writers are, essentially providing the necessary background for the episode's forthcoming critique of product integration.

This critique first emerges through the episode's acknowledgement of the stigma generally associated with product placement. After the conclusion of the video, the following exchange takes place, which so skillfully parodies not only product integration, but also the stigmatization of it, that it is worth quoting in its entirety.

Liz: I'm sorry, you're saying you want us to use the show to sell stuff?

Jack: Look, I know how this sounds—

Liz: No. Come on, Jack. We're not doing that. We're not compromising the integrity of the show to sell—

Pete: Wow, this is diet Snapple?

Liz: I know, it tastes just like regular Snapple, doesn't it?

Frank: You should try Plumegranate. It's amazing.

Cerie (looking directly into camera): I only date guys who drink Snapple.

Jack: Look, we all love Snapple, lord knows I do, but we need to focus here. We're talking about product integration.

Clearly, while this conversation initially appears to argue against the incorporation of branded products into television programming, the entire scene is in fact a blatant example of product placement. However, it is much more complicated than a simple parody of product integration, as Liz's dialogue expertly addresses the issues that are typically associated with the commerciality of the enterprise. Liz, indignant at the thought of using her show to sell branded products, does not want to compromise her artistic integrity, nor that of the show. This complex duality of meaning reflects the double-coded language of parody previously introduced by Margaret Rose. This diegetic example of double-coded language again reflects issues of reception, as the viewer must actualize the embedded critical function of Liz's dialogue in order to successfully comprehend its reflexive message. By candidly addressing the inherent issues of product integration, the episode attempts to simultaneously absolve itself of the stigma associated with engaging in the practice, while also seemingly acknowledging the viewer through its highly transparent and unambiguous treatment of product placement.

The skillful critical commentary of "Jack-Tor" is ultimately cemented through Liz and Pete's final solution to their being required to write a sketch that incorporates branded products. As Liz explains to Jack, "So, we wrote a product integration sketch… but we wanted to run it by you first because it's about how GE is making us do this and we were kinda hoping that the GE executive in the sketch could be played by… you." As if the reflexive message could not be any clearer, Jack replies, laughing, "Oh, I get it. The whole self-referential thing: Letterman hates the suits, Stern yells at his boss, Nixon's 'sock it to me' on *Laugh In*. Yeah, hippie humor." This

simple exchange secures not only the meta-referential message of the episode as a whole, as the entire narrative parallels the proposed *TGS* sketch, but also suggests the series' larger attitude toward its commercial context, recognizing product integration as a necessary practice within the current economic state of our media landscape. As Ethan Thompson states, "[*30 Rock* seems] to have adopted the observational style as a corollary to parodying television production; if parody not only simulates form but critiques it, then the observational aesthetic is adopted as another method of telling the 'truth' about television production."[23] "Jack-Tor" illustrates the series' general use of the techniques of meta-production, as *30 Rock* consistently uses direct address and product placement in order to offer critical and often-parodic commentary on its own corporate ownership, as well as television production processes.

Conclusion

An increasingly common strategy employed by reflexive television series, meta-production is critical in nature and uses various textual devices in order to call attention to the artifice of a given program. As skillfully represented on *30 Rock*, meta-production utilizes such techniques as product placement and direct address in order to make deliberate references to the production process. Furthermore, just as meta-production serves to foreground the mediation of television programming, so does it invite viewers to recognize the inherent critical commentary and reflexivity characteristic of these references. While some scholars assert the commercial issues associated with meta-production in general, and branded entertainment in particular, I argue that the reflexivity of many contemporary television programs illustrates a mode of media democratization through the transparency with which they approach the application of branded entertainment. While I do not mean to assert reflexivity as a destabilizing force against

entrenched forms of corporate control, I do argue that the narrative techniques of reflexive television, including meta-production, better equip audiences to recognize, and more importantly, resist, certain programming practices that the television industry appropriates in order to garner more viewers. In addition, I would argue that reflexive television series approach the textual manifestation of product placement with much more accountability than their traditionally seamless counterparts, as the highly critical and parodic nature of the presentation alerts viewers to the fact that they are watching a commercial enterprise. I have illustrated how meta-production, when knowingly addressed by producers, functions to reveal the mediation of a given program through deliberate, often-parodic references to the production process; ultimately placing an expectation on the viewer in terms of both recognition and interpretation of these critical reflexive messages.

Chapter Three: Meta-Episodes

Incorporating various meta-techniques throughout their diegeses, televisual meta-episodes are characterized by their overall focus on the disruption of series conventions, as well as their self-conscious variations on the accepted norms of a given series. While reflexive television programming generally employs the use of meta-reference and meta-production within largely conventional narratives, meta-episodes are distinguished by a uniquely structural imperative. In other words, rather than simply including various reflexive strategies within the diegesis of an otherwise formulaic narrative, meta-episodes construct an entire episode around strategies of self-critique and deconstruction. Meta-episodes are defined as individual episodes of a given program that break with and/or make explicit established series conventions through the self-conscious deconstruction of various aspects of the television text. By purposefully critiquing such diverse components of a series as its genre, performers, aesthetics, and especially its formal and thematic norms, meta-episodes illustrate a distinct form of structural reflexivity, ultimately serving to call attention to the artifice of a given program by revealing its highly mediated nature. In this chapter, I will explore the concept of meta-episodes as they operate within the larger storyworlds of reflexive television series, adopting the WB's *Supernatural* (2005-) as a representative case study. Through the purposeful deconstruction of the established characteristics of a given series, meta-episodes essentially act as a self-conscious critique or analysis of the series itself; ultimately serving to challenge viewers' existing knowledge and familiarity with accepted series conventions and thematic norms.

Meta-episodes largely differ from the various techniques of meta-reference and meta-production in the relative frequency, transparency, and formal composition of their textual application. While minor meta-references are consistently included within individual episodes of

a given program, meta-episodes are deployed within the larger narratives of these reflexive series with much less frequency. Offering a practical example, *Arrested Development* (2003-2006, 2013) typically incorporates numerous meta-references within the diegesis of any given episode, while the series includes only one distinct example of a meta-episode, humorously entitled "S.O.B.s" (3:9). Reflecting the uncertain future of the series due to its poor ratings, the episode adopts numerous narrative strategies in order to earn more viewers, including special guest stars, cliffhangers, and a "live" ending. Stated simply, "S.O.B.s" is an example of a meta-episode in that it employs the use of these traditionally exploitative televisual strategies in a highly self-conscious manner, essentially poking fun at its own troubled production context. As meta-episodes eschew the dominant style of a given series in favor of reflexivity and narrative innovation, their textual application is comparatively infrequent, ultimately strengthening their overall narrative impact.

Additionally, the transparency with which reflexive television programs deploy the occasional meta-episode is much greater than that of a typical meta-reference. While meta-references are generally subtle in nature, placing a high expectation of recognition and interpretation on the viewer, meta-episodes are decidedly more conspicuous in their overall tone, asserting their reflexive messages not only with a tangible sense of transparency and immediacy, but also offering greater approachability to the audience. *30 Rock* (2006-2013) offers an illustrative example of this characteristic in its two live episodes, appropriately entitled "Live Show" (5:4) and "Live from Studio 6H" (6:19). While the entire series is meta in its self-conscious depiction of contemporary television production, these two live meta-episodes offer a distinctly transparent critique of the production process, industrial context, and of course, the series itself. This is perhaps most evident in the episodes' departure from the show's typical

multi-camera setup in favor of the more traditional single camera style. This relatively subtle technical difference not only alters the aesthetics of the series, but also offers a meta-commentary on traditional sitcom conventions and styles. Due to their overt focus on achieving narrative difference – and perhaps even discontinuity – through the use of various narrative techniques, meta-episodes are considerably more transparent in the deployment of their reflexive messages.

Finally, what is perhaps the most distinguishing characteristic of meta-episodes are their distinct differences in formal structure, specifically as they compare to meta-reference and meta-production. In other words, while the techniques of meta-reference and meta-production are simply included within the diegeses of otherwise formulaic narratives, meta-episodes adopt strategies of self-critique and deconstruction as their larger thematic imperative. In other words, while a typical episode of a reflexive television series is largely concerned with forward narrative momentum, meta-episodes place their focus on foregrounding established series conventions, ultimately offering a sophisticated meta-commentary on multiple components of the text itself. However, this is not to say that meta-episodes and plot progression are mutually exclusive. In fact, meta-episodes are narratively complex in that they generally convey their disruptive reflexive message while also serving to move the plot forward. As I will later discuss, *Supernatural* consistently offers illustrative examples of meta-episodes that deploy this structural imperative, ultimately commenting upon multiple aspects of the series through a process of critical self-analysis. Distinguished from the various techniques of meta-reference and meta-production by their relative infrequency, greater transparency, and structural focus, meta-episodes are a unique illustration of the defining characteristics of contemporary reflexive television programming.

In his article "What If?: Charting Television's New Textual Boundaries," Jeffrey Sconce explores the ways in which contemporary television in the United States has demonstrated an increasing focus on building more complex storyworlds, essentially allowing for entirely new modes of audience engagement. Sconce largely attributes this evolving transformation in programming trends to the insight of television producers who understand their audiences' ability to appreciate the complexity of complicated narratives. While Sconce primarily focuses on these larger trends in contemporary television programming, he also examines a common feature of serialized television shows that directly relates to meta-episodes. As Sconce states,

> Producers of long-running television programs have long sought to strike a narrative balance between repetition of premise and differentiation of plot. If a series is to succeed for hundreds of episodes, it must feature an appealingly familiar and yet ultimately repetitive foundation of premise and character relations… too much repetition and familiarity can lead to stagnation, forcing producers to find ways to breathe new life into tired characters and situations.[1]

Reflecting the type of overt generic, aesthetic, and narrative variations that define meta-episodes, Sconce's argument suggests that the fundamental purpose of meta-episodes is to offer these variations and subversions in order to inject difference into established series conventions. While reflexivity is not specifically concerned with this notion of repetition with difference, Sconce's argument evokes the general function of meta-episodes to offer subtle variations on established series conventions, ultimately serving to play with audiences' expectations and knowledge regarding a particular program.

Defining Meta-Episodes

Encompassing a broad range of complex storytelling techniques, meta-episodes are individual installments of a given television program that break with and/or make explicit established series conventions by placing their narrative focus on strategies of self-critique and

deconstruction. Stated simply, meta-episodes may be described as "novelty" pieces, as they purposefully subvert the dominant narrative and aesthetic styles employed by their "host" series. Although they differ from the various techniques of meta-reference and meta-production in a number of significant ways, meta-episodes are nonetheless similar to these two concepts in their use of multiple strategies that serve to convey their reflexive message. In his article "Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television," Jason Mittell supports the assertions of Sconce above by explaining, "…within the broader mode of complexity, many programs actively work against serial norms but also embrace narrative strategies to rebel against episodic conventionality."[2] In other words, as programs become established in their own formal and thematic norms, they often adopt new, and increasingly complex, narrative strategies in order to subvert their own conventionality, and perhaps even predictability. Importantly, what Mittell refers to as "narratively spectacular episodes," those individual narratives that are characterized by this destabilization of accepted norms, are one type of meta-episode. Televisual meta-episodes employ the use of complex narrative strategies in order to both subvert established series conventions and audience expectations. As Mittell further elucidates,

> [These] programs… embrace more elaborate storytelling techniques, such as temporal play, shifting perspectives and focalization, repetition, and overt experimentation with genre and narrative norms. Many contemporary programs are more reflexive in their narration, embracing an operational aesthetic encouraging viewers to pay more attention to the level of narrative discourse as well as the storyworld.[3]

Programs like *Supernatural* periodically employ the use of meta-episodes in order to destabilize series conventions, as well as undermine the expectations of their audiences. By incorporating more complex storytelling techniques within their diegeses, meta-episodes invite viewers to appreciate the narrative, while also encouraging them to use their existing knowledge of series norms in order to recognize when they are explicitly broken or foregrounded.

A season three episode of *Supernatural* entitled "Ghostfacers" (3:13) offers an example of a common type of meta-episode in its adoption of an entirely new narrative and aesthetic style. First introduced in an episode entitled "Hell House" (1:17), the Ghostfacers are a group of amateur ghost hunters who seek to expand their web series into a television show, and ultimately become a source of great difficulty and irritation for our protagonists, Sam (Jared Padalecki) and Dean (Jensen Ackles) Winchester. "Ghostfacers" employs the use of various complex narrative strategies, including shifts in temporality, focalization, and overt experimentation with genre, in order to subvert established series conventions. This installment of *Supernatural* is particularly notable in that it situates the pilot episode of a fictional reality show entitled *Ghostfacers* as the diegetic narrative of a single episode of *Supernatural*. While Sam and Dean play crucial roles throughout the episode, "Ghostfacers" primarily focuses on the experiences of its eponymous group of ghost hunters, illustrating a major shift in narrative focalization away from the two protagonists. Additionally, the episode is filmed almost entirely in the style of a reality show, using such techniques as handheld camerawork, night vision, and extreme close-ups, posing an obvious aesthetic departure from the generally seamless presentation of the series. Using a number of complex storytelling strategies, "Ghostfacers" illustrates the breaking of series conventions that characterizes meta-episodes, offering distinct variations on the narrative, formal, and thematic norms of *Supernatural*. Stated simply, this "one-off" meta-episode is reflexive in its deliberate subversion of audience expectations, as the overall style of the series is fundamentally altered, as well as its typical narrative focus on the activities of Sam and Dean, ultimately forcing audiences to re-examine their existing knowledge of the series.

Textual Manifestation

When considering the textual manifestation of meta-episodes, it is important to note that this particular strategy is unique to long-term storytelling, as a program must first establish a set of recognizable storytelling conventions before it can deliberately alter or break with them. As programs become established in these complex conventions, they offer variations on their own thematic, formal, and aesthetic norms in order to subvert episodic conventionality; variations Mittell usefully refers to as "narrative special effects." Indeed, as Mittell explains, "…[Television] creators vary the presentation of these [formal patterns in order] to offer misdirections and elaborations [that] keep viewers engaged once they understand the show's intrinsic norms."[4] As audiences become increasingly familiar with series conventions, meta-episodes offer playful variations on learned norms; serving not only to engage, and perhaps even retain, long-term viewers, but also to reveal the necessarily mediated nature of serialized television programming. Ultimately, I will analyze the ways in which meta-episodes break with and/or make explicit established series conventions through the self-conscious deconstruction of both textual and contextual aspects of the given series.

Importantly, the central function of meta-episodes to offer variations on series norms is directly related to issues of genre, as established generic conventions inherently inform the ways in which texts are both produced and consumed. In his book *Film/Genre*, Rick Altman presents a thorough analysis of contemporary genre theory, essentially arguing that there is no way to conceive of a totalizing definition of film genre due to its often contradictory conceptualizations. Reflecting this multiplicity of functions, Altman states,

> … Genre endures within film theory because of its ability to perform multiple operations simultaneously. According to most critics, genres provide the formulas that drive production; genres constitute the structures that define individual texts; programming

> decisions are based primarily on generic criteria; the interpretation of generic films depends directly on the audience's generic expectations.[5]

This all-encompassing theorization of genre reflects its underlying relation to reflexivity, as the purposeful alteration of established generic norms at the point of production affects not only the overall structure of meta-episodes, but also their reception among television audiences. In other words, genre theory accounts for the ostensible reflexive intention behind meta-episodes' subversion of generic conventions by suggesting their eventual reception among viewers who are able to comprehend that reflexive message. Furthermore, Altman echoes the assertions of Sconce above by asserting the variability of genre, stating, "Unlike the exact replicas produced by other consumer industries (clothing, appliances, cars), genre films must not only be similar in order to succeed, they must also be different."[6] Despite his particular focus on the cinema, Altman's assertions directly apply to meta-episodes, as they deliberately undermine generic conventions in order to offer variations on the narrative style of a given series.

Playing with generic and aesthetic norms is one of the major ways in which meta-episodes deliberately break with series conventions. Adopting a different genre from that of the program as a whole, such meta-episodes serve as a purposeful acknowledgement of the aesthetic norms of a given series by offering variations on its stylistic construction. For example, a season four episode of *Supernatural* entitled "Monster Movie" (4:5) largely adheres to the formal and narrative patterns previously established by the series, while also offering contrast in its stylistic construction. Presented entirely in black and white, "Monster Movie" parodies classic horror films, appropriating their distinct visual style and classic themes within the context of the *Supernatural* storyworld. Meta-episodes such as this one most evidently break with series conventions through their explicit alterations of generic and aesthetic norms, offering a meta-commentary on the types of established generic functions outlined by Altman above.

Furthermore, meta-episodes that present generic and aesthetic variations are often intertextual in nature, as they typically reference canonical texts within the genre that they are knowingly adopting. This is particularly evident in "Monster Movie," as the episode incorporates direct references to such classic films as *Dracula* (1931), *The Wolf Man* (1941), and *The Mummy* (1932). In addition to "Monster Movie," there are numerous contemporary examples of meta-episodes that break with generic and aesthetic norms, and they are as diverse as *Fringe*'s interpretation of the film noir genre in "Brown Betty" (2:20), *Community*'s holiday Claymation episode, entitled "Abed's Uncontrollable Christmas" (2:11), and what is perhaps the best-known example, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*'s musical "Once More, with Feeling" (6:7). Although decidedly less complex than other forms of narrative special effect, meta-episodes that break with generic and aesthetic norms nevertheless offer a meta-commentary on the conventions of genre that have long been established within the media industries. In other words, there is a form of deliberate reflexivity to the strategy of genre mixing in that a series must first recognize these generic conventions in order to effectively alter and manipulate them. Meta-episodes that play with generic and aesthetic norms not only acknowledge their own stylistic construction, but also form a critical reflexive parody of long-established generic conventions.

Similar in textual application to those individual narratives that alter generic and aesthetic norms, meta-episodes that break with established formal and thematic conventions are perhaps the most common mode of this reflexive strategy on contemporary television. A technique often employed by such diverse texts as *Six Feet Under*, *The Simpsons*, and *Angel*, these particular meta-episodes are characterized by their deliberate subversion of the formal and thematic norms established by their respective series. In other words, as all television programming adheres to some type of established narrative formula, meta-episodes seek to rebel against this

conventionality through the subversion of the unique formal patterns of their particular series. Additionally, this form of meta-episode is especially reliant upon viewer familiarity, as the effective transmission of an episode's reflexive message depends upon audience knowledge of accepted formal and thematic conventions. As Mittell states, "The broad range of variations on [a] show's established formal pattern builds on established norms and offers a set of playful pleasures that depend on the long-term commitments and memories of viewers unique to serialized storytelling."[7] As viewer memory of previous episodes creates certain expectations regarding narrative formula, producers of meta-episodes deliberately undermine these expectations by altering and playing with the actual deployment of these formal patterns. An installment of *Supernatural*, entitled "Mystery Spot" (3:11), provides an illustrative example of this type of meta-episode, purposefully breaking with the established formal conventions of the series. When Sam and Dean travel to a small town in order to investigate the strange occurrences surrounding a tourist attraction known as "The Mystery Spot" – where the laws of physics do not apply – Sam is thrown into a repeating temporal loop, doomed to live the same day over and over again, while watching Dean die in a different manner with each new day. As *Supernatural* is largely episodic, generally adhering to the "monster-of-the-week" formula previously established by shows like *Buffy* and *The X-Files*, "Mystery Spot" offers a notable variation on these formal patterns. Repeatedly delaying the episodic conflict resolution characteristic of the series as a whole, this particular episode follows a "repetition with difference" model, as producers overtly play with, and perhaps even feint, audience expectations regarding the established formal patterns of the series. Meta-episodes like "Mystery Spot" offer playful variations on the accepted formal and thematic norms of a given series, serving not only to keep long-term viewers engaged through the deliberate subversion of their expectations, but also to

reveal the inherent mediation of television programming by calling attention to its established narrative patterns.

One of the more complex ways in which meta-episodes significantly alter program conventions is through the deliberate acknowledgment of their respective series' production contexts. Although similar to meta-production, these episodes primarily differ in their structural imperative, adopting a strategy of self-critique as their narrative focus rather than the simple inclusion of meta-references, and the comparatively diverse nature of their allusions to the production process. In other words, while meta-production is largely focused upon technical and commercial issues, meta-episodes that parody their own production contexts address a broader range of characteristics; addressing such varied program features as its current industrial context, details of its canon, and the previous roles and celebrity personas of its stars. Additionally, these meta-episodes are particularly notable in that they rely less on breaking with established series conventions than they do on making those conventions explicit, and therefore revealing their inherent artifice. For instance, while meta-episodes that alter generic and aesthetic norms are defined by their deliberate subversion of series conventions, these particular meta-episodes adopt a distinctly parodic tone in order to bring these conventions to the forefront; ultimately serving to reveal the given television text as a highly mediated object. Typically through the use of meta-references throughout, this particular form of meta-episode deliberately, and most often humorously, parodies numerous aspects of the series itself, ultimately serving to construct a highly critical, and perhaps even revealing, commentary on the unique production context of a given series.

An episode of *Supernatural* entitled "Hollywood Babylon" (2:18) provides a particularly illustrative example of a meta-episode that playfully acknowledges aspects of its own production

circumstances through a critique of the film industry as a whole. Upon learning of the strange circumstances surrounding the death of a crewmember on the set of the fictional *Hell Hazers II*, Sam and Dean go undercover as production assistants in order to investigate the seemingly haunted location. Immediately reflexive in its film industry setting, the episode offers both a larger commentary on the current state of the industry, critiquing the hyperbolic nature of the performances in horror films, for example, as well as parodying multiple aspects of the series itself, both textual and contextual. For instance, the episode positions the actual executive producer of *Supernatural*, McG, as the director of the fictional *Hell Hazers II*, even incorporating visual references to the series' canon in the promotional posters of McG's other fictional films; the artwork for *Monster Truck* being a subtle reference to a previous episode entitled "Route 666" (1:13), just as the poster for *Carnival* is a reference to "Everybody Loves a Clown" (2:2). Additionally, "Hollywood Babylon" includes a particularly comical meta-reference to a previous role of one of its stars, Jared Padalecki. At the beginning of the episode, Sam and Dean are taking a tour of the production lot, during which their guide announces, "To the right is Stars' Hollow, the setting for the television series *Gilmore Girls*… and if we're lucky, we might even catch one of the show's stars." Viewers familiar with the work Padalecki will likely recognize the reference, as the actor had a recurring role on *Gilmore Girls* prior to being cast in *Supernatural*. "Hollywood Babylon" is particularly representative of meta-episodes that address their own production contexts in that it adopts a distinctly parodic tone in order to make explicit multiple characteristics of the series itself, ultimately serving to reveal its status as a mediated text.

The textual manifestation of meta-episodes is particularly distinct in that they rely both on the serialized nature of contemporary television programming, as well as the existing

familiarity of viewers with accepted series norms. In other words, a program must first establish a set of recognizable series conventions before a meta-episode may deliberately alter or manipulate them, just as the effective transmission of their reflexive message depends upon viewer knowledge of common formal patterns. This broad range of playful variations on established series conventions serves to challenge audience expectations regarding episodic conventionality. As Mittell states, "… [the] pleasure in these [episodes] is marveling at the narrational bravado on display by violating storytelling conventions in a spectacular fashion."[8] Stated simply, the primary function of meta-episodes is their subversion of accepted narrative norms; serving to destabilize the expectations of long-term viewers, expectations that are necessarily based upon their memories of previous episodes. Generally adopting a distinctly parodic tone, meta-episodes break with and/or make explicit established series conventions by placing their narrative focus on strategies of self-critique and deconstruction, ultimately revealing the highly mediated nature of television programming by foregrounding these inherently artificial narrative norms. Meta-episodes are evocative of the overall function of reflexive television in their diegetic invitations to active audience engagement. By offering complex meta-commentaries on multiple aspects of the series itself, meta-episodes encourage viewers to extend the television text by discussing their comprehension and interpretations of the reflexive message.

Intention and Reception

As discussed above, the reflexive commentary characteristic of meta-episodes is predicated upon the recognition of established series conventions for its effective transmission; accordingly, this particular reflexive strategy is again related to issues of audience reception. In

other words, meta-episodes are distinct in that they depend upon their audience's familiarity with complex formal patterns for the successful deployment of their parodic messages. While the desired function of all reflexive strategies – meta-reference and meta-production included – is reliant upon a process of active audience recognition and interpretation, narratively complex meta-episodes require a higher level of engagement from their viewers. As Mittell states,

> Through the operational aesthetic these complex narratives invite viewers to engage at the level of formal analyst, dissecting the techniques used to convey spectacular displays of storytelling craft; this mode of formally aware viewing is highly encouraged by these programs, as their pleasures are embedded in a level of awareness that transcends the traditional focus on diegetic action typical of most viewers.[9]

As a broad range of variations on complex formal patterns characterizes their textual manifestation, meta-episodes require the interpretive skills of a long-term viewer for the effective recognition of their reflexive message, a viewer who is necessarily familiar with these distinct series conventions. In other words, the complexity of reflexive television programming projects this mode of formally aware viewing, as the distinct pleasures of meta-episodes are actualized through audiences' pre-existing knowledge of series conventions, therefore transcending the typical focus of the viewer on diegetic action. Following Mittell's assertions, meta-episodes are highly evocative of contemporary television at large, as they are characterized by their distinct formal complexity, as well as their necessarily engaged, media literate, and participatory viewers.

Largely due to their defining structural imperative, meta-episodes illustrate a creative or producer intention that the more subtle techniques of meta-reference and meta-production do not. As evidenced by the fact that a given series periodically dedicates an entire narrative to overt self-critique and deconstruction, meta-episodes are comparatively more deliberate and accessible in their transmission of reflexive commentary. Stated simply, due to this pronounced

transparency, the reflexive intention behind meta-episodes is decidedly less speculative, especially when compared to the relative subtlety of other contemporary reflexive strategies. Within this context, the notion of producer awareness of consumer practices, as it specifically relates to meta-episodes, is once again of particular importance. First, and on a more basic level, as programs become established in their own complex narrative conventions, meta-episodes present a unique method by which producers may keep long-term viewers engaged. By offering critical variations on series norms, producers playfully challenge the existing knowledge and familiarity of their audiences, essentially renewing their interest and engagement in the series by subverting their expectations. Second, those distinctly parodic meta-episodes that seek to make explicit established series conventions are highly indicative of the notion of producer awareness of consumer practices. Through their self-conscious acknowledgement of established series conventions, meta-episodes often serve to evoke the individual viewing experiences of their series' regular viewers, deconstructing those program characteristics that are particularly recognizable or notable to audiences. In other words, the producers of parodic meta-episodes often address the "recognizability" of certain aspects of their series, essentially illustrating their awareness of active consumer practices through the self-conscious acknowledgement of their own series norms. Largely due to the relative transparency with which they present their reflexive commentary, meta-episodes are especially indicative of producer awareness of consumer practices, essentially acknowledging the viewing experience of their regular audience.

Case Study: *Supernatural* (2005-)

Initially premiering on The WB in 2005, and currently airing on The CW, *Supernatural* is a horror and fantasy inspired hour-long drama created by Eric Kripke. The series follows the

adventures of Sam (Padalecki) and Dean (Ackles) Winchester, two brothers who travel the country in Dean's beloved '67 Chevy Impala in search of dangerous supernatural entities. Belonging to a small community of hunters seeking to eradicate these paranormal threats, Sam and Dean are constantly fighting to destroy ghosts, vampires, demons, and all manner of menacing supernatural figures, often enlisting the help of a fellow hunter, Bobby (Jim Beaver), a rebellious demon named Ruby (Genevieve Padalecki), and an angel of the lord, Castiel (Misha Collins). Boasting a notoriously passionate fan following, the cult series is especially notable for the brotherly chemistry between Padalecki and Ackles, a complex and compelling mythology built over nine seasons, as well as its self-deprecating, and occasionally mocking, attitude toward certain aspects of its own existence, especially the hypercritical nature of its fandom. *Supernatural*'s often self-referential approach to storytelling not only rewards longtime viewers and helps sustain its devoted community of fans, but also positions the series as an exemplar of contemporary reflexive television in general, and meta-episodes in particular.

A season two episode of *Supernatural* entitled "Tall Tales" (2:15) is an example of a meta-episode that both makes explicit established series conventions, while also subtly illustrating the above conceptualization of producer awareness of consumer practices. Through the use of subjective flashbacks, the episode calls attention to the characterization of its two protagonists, diegetically addressing their ostensible perception within the *Supernatural* fan community. Investigating the apparent suicide of a well-known professor, Sam and Dean are perplexed by the seemingly tabloid-inspired occurrences surrounding a college campus, including an alien abduction and alligators in the sewers. With Bobby's help, Sam and Dean eventually discover that these strange events are the work of a Trickster (Richard Speight Jr.), a mythological being that has the ability to conjure into reality anything or anyone it wants. The

evident reflexivity of the episode emerges through an escalating feud between Sam and Dean, a feud that ultimately leads to the hyperbolic, and highly self-referential, nature of their flashbacks. Describing to Bobby the strange happenings that preceded his arrival, the two protagonists offer one another's version of events, Sam narrating for Dean, and Dean for Sam. Detailing their conversation with a friend of the victim supposedly abducted by aliens, Dean, speaking as Sam, states, "Look, man, I… I know this all has to be so hard," to which the student easily responds, "Um, not so much." Ignoring him, Sam continues, "But I want you to know, I'm here for you. You brave little soldier. I acknowledge your pain." Then, with an unwelcome embrace, Sam stares into the sky, dramatically saying, "Too precious for this world." Back in the present, Sam angrily exclaims, "I never said that!" to which Dean quickly responds, "You always say pansy stuff like that." Through its skillful use of subjective flashbacks, "Tall Tales" offers a meta-commentary on the characterization of its two protagonists, exaggerating such long-established character traits as Sam's over-sensitivity and seriousness, as opposed to Dean's hypermasculinity and recklessness. (Earlier in the episode, Dean protests when Sam claims that he referred to a woman in a bar as a "feisty little wildcat.") Representative of those meta-episodes that make explicit established formal and thematic conventions of a given series, "Tall Tales" is highly self-referential in its depiction of Sam and Dean, ultimately acknowledging the perception of their characters within the *Supernatural* fan community.

Unlike the relative subtlety of "Tall Tales," the most illustrative meta-episodes within the *Supernatural* canon are those narratives that overtly address aspects of the series itself, most notably its notoriously devoted fan following. One such narrative is "The Monster at the End of This Book" (4:18), the first episode among numerous others in the series to address the issue of "Wincest" – a term referring to fan fiction that depicts an incestuous relationship between Sam

and Dean. After learning of his existence from the owner of a comic book store, Sam and Dean investigate a reclusive young author named Chuck Shurley (Rob Benedict), who has been writing a series of books based on their lives since 2005. While trying to find an explanation for how he knows so much about their personal lives, Sam and Dean eventually learn that Chuck is a prophet of the lord, which explains his detailed visions involving the two protagonists and his knowledge of their dealings with Lilith, a powerful demon. "The Monster at the End of This Book" is particularly complex, as it addresses multiple aspects of the series' production context, whether textual or contextual. For example, the episode immediately adopts a mocking tone when the owner of the comic book store describes the series of books to Sam and Dean, therefore describing *Supernatural* itself. He states, "… Two guys, use fake IDs with rock aliases, hunt down ghosts, demons, vampires. What are their names? Uh… Steve and Dirk? Sal and Dane?" Through the use of a rather humorous meta-reference, the episode offers an explicit vocalization of program conventions, acknowledging the series' most basic thematic norms, and conversely, the lack of knowledge by series outsiders. The collection of books provides yet another reference to the series itself, as Sam and Dean are seen viewing an online fan site (illustration 3.1) that lists the series of books, whose titles are taken directly from previous episodes of *Supernatural*. Finally – in what is perhaps the most obvious example of producer awareness of consumer practices – Sam and Dean, still viewing the same web site, discuss the comments of fans of the fictional book series, essentially describing the online activities of actual *Supernatural* fans. When Sam discovers an online forum for fans of Chuck's books, the following exchange takes place:

> Dean: There are Sam girls and Dean girls and… What's a slash fan?
>
> Sam: As in, Sam/Dean. Together.

Dean: Like… *Together* together?

Sam: Yeah.

Dean: They do know we're brothers, right?

Sam: Doesn't seem to matter.

Dean: Aw, come on. That's just sick.

Through its direct acknowledgement of Wincest, an important facet of the *Supernatural* subculture, the episode diegetically addresses an extra-diegetic phenomenon, explicitly illustrating the notion of producer awareness of consumer practices. "The Monster at the End of this Book" adopts a characteristically parodic and self-referential tone in order to address multiple aspects of the series itself; most notably, its notoriously devoted and active fans.

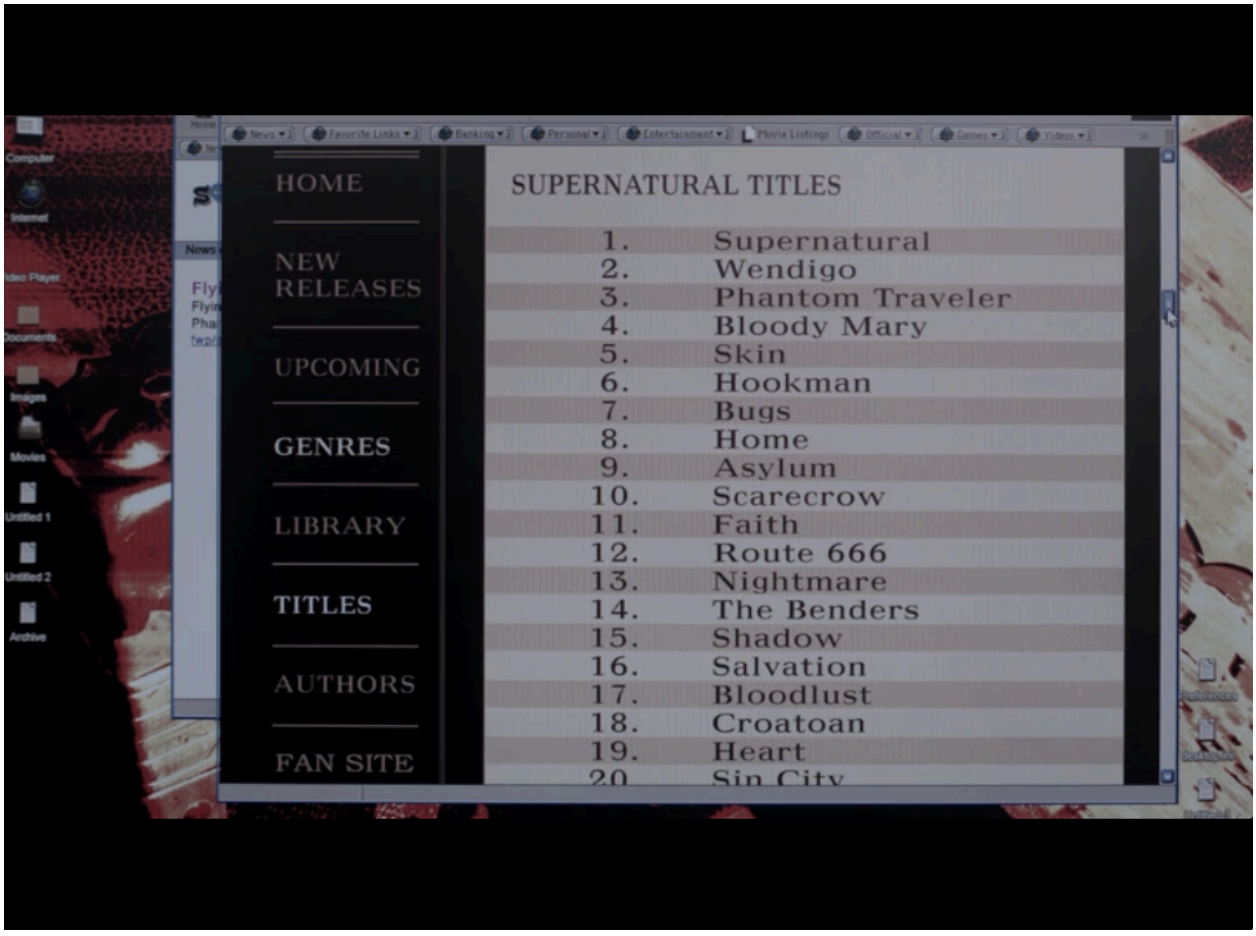

Illustration 3.1. Online fan site depicting the titles of the fictional series of *Supernatural* books, which are taken directly from previous episodes of the show

While the *Supernatural* storyworld offers a wealth of diverse meta-episodes, there is no installment more demonstrative of this particular reflexive strategy than "The French Mistake" (6:15). Overtly illustrating the three types of textual manifestation outlined above, the episode is reflexive on numerous levels, constructing a highly complex and parodic meta-commentary on the television production process, the celebrity personas of its stars, and, of course, multiple aspects of the series itself. In order to protect them from Raphael and a host of other vengeful angels, Balthazar (Sebastian Roché) sends Sam and Dean to a parallel universe in which the brothers are the stars of a television show called *Supernatural*. As Sam and Dean begin to understand where they are and what is happening, the following exchange takes place:

> Sam: Look, I think I know what this is… It's a TV show.
>
> Dean: You think?
>
> Sam: I mean, *here*. Wherever *here* is, this twilight zone Balthazar zapped us into, for whatever reason, our life is a TV show.
>
> Dean: Why?
>
> Sam: I don't know.
>
> Dean: No, seriously, why? Why would anyone want to watch our lives?
>
> Sam: Well, according to the interviewer, not very many people do. Look, I'm not saying it makes sense, I'm just saying that we landed in some dimension where you're Jensen Ackles and I'm something called a "Jared Padalecki."

This brief conversation between Sam and Dean establishes the parodic tone for the entire episode, as it is both playful and mocking in its meta-references to the larger production process, as well as of the stars and viewership of *Supernatural*. Such meta-references continue throughout

the episode, as the brothers learn they are in Vancouver, the actual shooting location of the series, and meet both "Eric Kripke" and "Robert Singer," the parallel versions of the series' creator and executive producer, respectively. "The French Mistake" is also highly reflexive in its acknowledgment of celebrity persona, as both Misha Collins and Genevieve Padalecki, Jared's real-life spouse, appear as negotiated versions of themselves; and much to Dean's dismay, he learns that Jensen previously appeared on *Days of Our Lives*. Additionally, the episode presents a complex meta-commentary on the television production process, established series norms, and audience response throughout. This particular reflexive commentary is perhaps no more evident than in a brief conversation between Bob Singer (Brian Doyle-Murray) and a production assistant. After Sam and Dean ruin the take on an elaborate stunt, the PA states, "Well, we can clean up, reset the window. Takes about 95 minutes, basically, so we'd have to blow off the scene where they sit on the Impala and talk about their feelings." To which Bob immediately responds, "Ha! Right. You answer the hate mail." In these two simple lines of dialogue, the episode not only offers a reflexive depiction of the television production process, but the producers also evidence an awareness of consistent thematic norms, and more importantly, the common fan response to those norms. Immediately reflexive in its media industry setting, "The French Mistake" constructs a highly complex meta-commentary on multiple aspects of *Supernatural*, including its production context, the celebrity personas of its stars, and most importantly, an evident awareness of consumer practices and fan response. Through their use of a uniquely parodic approach, meta-episodes ultimately serve to foreground the highly mediated nature of television programming by calling attention to the inherent artificiality of established series conventions.

Conclusion

Distinguished by their structural imperative, constructing an entire narrative around strategies of self-critique and deconstruction, meta-episodes are largely characterized by their focus on the destabilization of series conventions, as well as their self-conscious variations on program norms. Stated simply, meta-episodes are individual episodes of a given program that break with and/or make explicit established series conventions through the self-conscious deconstruction of various aspects of the television text. Whether by breaking with generic and aesthetic norms, offering playful variations on formal and thematic patterns, or directly acknowledging multiple aspects of a given series' production context, meta-episodes function to reveal the highly mediated nature of television programming. In other words, meta-episodes construct their reflexive commentary by foregrounding the inherent artificiality, and perhaps even irreality, of established series conventions. Additionally, as the effective transmission of this reflexive message is predicated upon the familiarity of the long-term viewer, meta-episodes are especially evocative of the notion of producer awareness of consumer practices. By offering playful variations on established series norms, producers essentially challenge their viewers' existing knowledge of program conventions; subverting their expectations, and offering a unique method by which to keep long-term viewers engaged. As evidenced by *Supernatural*, a series that consistently, and most often humorously, employs the use of this particular strategy, meta-episodes reflect larger trends in contemporary television programming, as their formal complexity necessitates an increasingly engaged, media literate, and participatory audience.

Conclusion

Contemporary television studies are consistent in their discussions of the increasing effects of digital media on the traditional narrative and aesthetic properties of television discourse. For instance, in his book *Time on TV: Temporal Displacement and Mashup Television*, Paul Booth examines the relationship between television and digital media through an analysis of these eponymous terms, defining "mashup television" as the integration of new media characteristics within traditional content. As Booth states, "Digital technology touches television, affecting not just the industrial development of the medium, but also its structure and aesthetics."[1] Larger developments within the industry itself – namely the emergence of DVD and DVR technology, which allow for repeated, time-shifted viewing – have contributed to the increasing narrative complexity characteristic of modern television. With such complex televisual strategies as multilayered plotting, narrative gaps, and the selective conveyance of important story information, the increasingly reciprocal relationship between television and digital media is subtly changing the way viewers interact with all forms of media, ultimately affecting viewing habits, as well as audiences' expectations of media in general. Reflexive television is evocative of this complementary relationship, as both contemporary television and digital media teach their audiences the necessary skills to situate themselves within a complex, postmodern media environment.[2] In other words, while reflexivity as a textual strategy has long been present within the discourses of film and literature, contemporary reflexive television is both projecting and reflecting broader changes in programming strategies, as well as anticipating the move to more direct forms of audience engagement and interactivity.

The relatively recent emergence of our digital society has not only changed the way in which viewers interact with media, but it has also dramatically altered the way in which media is

consumed. Due to the time-shifting capabilities of various digital technologies, television can no longer be easily identified as a "mass medium" in the traditional sense of the term, as large-scale, simultaneous viewings of a single text by geographically dispersed audiences have been replaced by viewing habits engendered by digital technology. Contemporary television is a medium that facilitates access to a broad range of programming forms, largely characterized by hybridized generic formats and complex narrative strategies like reflexivity. In their article "Reflexivity in Television Depictions of Media Industries: Peeking Behind the Gilt Curtain," Brooke E. Duffy, Tara Liss-Mariño, and Katherine Sender state,

> As audiences have hundreds of media outlets from which to choose, producers must be rigorous in their attempts to engage them with interactive and cross-platform content… In their struggle to appeal to increasingly savvy audiences, producers have turned to reflexive strategies that invite them behind the 'gilt curtain' of media production.[3]

In the characteristically fractured and competitive landscape of contemporary television, reflexivity has emerged as a common strategy through which to engage media literate viewers by self-consciously deconstructing the boundaries traditionally constructed by works of fiction. In this thesis, I have shown that the various strategies of meta-reference, meta-production, and meta-episodes illustrate the effects of digital media on traditional content by not only embracing the trend in narratively complex programming strategies, but also by projecting the types of active audience engagement facilitated by digital technology.

The Distinct Pleasures of Reflexive Television

As reflexivity is a well-established narrative strategy within the discourses of film and literature, I have thus far explored its unique formal conventions, narrative techniques, and rhetorical functions as it specifically operates within the context of the television medium. However, televisual reflexivity exhibits its own set of pleasures that are inherently different from

those of cinematic or literary meta-narratives. Largely due to its distinct narrative complexity, long-term, serialized format, and increasingly transmediated nature, contemporary television storytelling "encourages audiences to become more actively engaged and offers a broader range of rewards and pleasures than most conventional programming."[4] In general, narratively complex television allows for more layered forms of engagement, providing a variety of subtle pleasures for viewers that not only encourages repeated viewings, but perhaps even necessitates them. Additionally, the distinctly serialized format of television programming yields rewards for long-term viewers that simply do not exist in the same capacity in film or literature. While a series of books or films offers a similar set of pleasures to the dedicated consumer, narratively complex, and especially reflexive, television consistently rewards its long-term viewers for their sustained interest by including subtle references to previous events that occurred on the series. Viewers of narratively complex television in general use these programs as the basis for active fan cultures, often engaging in direct feedback loops with industry professionals. Unlike the comparatively closed format of both film and literature, television is an increasingly open system that allows viewers the distinct pleasure of interacting with "the powers that be."

While these broader sets of pleasures apply to narratively complex television in general, therefore also including reflexive texts, the most distinct and rewarding aspects of reflexive television are what Sharon Marie Ross has previously defined as "invitations to tele-participation." Fundamentally describing the larger rhetorical purpose of reflexivity, Ross' term refers to the use of varying narrative techniques that serve to invite audiences into the text, essentially encouraging viewers to immerse themselves within the rich storyworld of a given program. As Ross further explains,

> … The more a narrative invites viewers to feel as if they are part of the storytelling experience, the higher the resonance with the viewer. And when this narrative has

> expanded beyond the 'TV text proper' through various invitational strategies, a sense of contribution and ownership multiplies. Thus, storytelling such as this, interwoven with notions of contribution and ownership, becomes about more than immediate gratification – it is about pleasurable work.[5]

The various narrative strategies that define televisual reflexivity effectively function to blur the boundaries typically established by works of fiction, ultimately projecting a form of active viewer engagement. In other words, by using such meta-techniques as direct address or voiceover narration, reflexive television invites viewers to temporarily violate these boundaries, stimulating the pleasurable sense of contribution and ownership that is distinctive to reflexive television programming. The overall complexity of reflexive television offers viewers a set of rewards and pleasures that inherently differ from those derived from film and literature. Reflexive television discourse offers a space for audiences to play with their own knowledge and expectations of the formal conventions traditionally associated with works of fiction, suggesting that each of these forms of pleasure relates to the type of pre-existing cultural knowledge that television producers ostensibly assume of their audience.[6]

Online Participation and Fan Response

A canonical term first introduced by Henry Jenkins, convergence culture refers to the flow of media content across multiple platforms, encapsulating the cooperation between different media industries that increasingly characterizes our current digital age. In their article "The Moral Economy of Web 2.0: Audience Research and Convergence Culture," Joshua Green and Jenkins explore this concept as it operates in relation to audience research, asserting a reconceptualization of the relationship between media producer and consumer that directly relates to reflexive television and its invitations to tele-participation. Within the specific context of our new digital economy, Green and Jenkins argue that fans have been redefined as the drivers

of wealth production, their engagement and participation therefore being actively pursued by media companies interested in adopting such digital strategies as user-generated content, social networks, and "harnessing collective intelligence."[7] Due to the ubiquity of the Internet, fans are now able to easily embrace communities of other like-minded viewers, sharing information, interpretations, and discussions of complex television narratives that invite such participatory engagement. Furthermore, industry professionals often use these online forums as feedback mechanisms to test for comprehension and pleasures, demonstrating that the types of active audience behavior that were previously considered subcultural are now increasingly visible in the mainstream.[8] However, this promise of shared control also suggests the exploitative potential of these feedback loops, as the increased visibility of active online fan communities opens them up to manipulation from industry professionals, an issue to which I will later return. Echoing the assertions of Green and Jenkins, Mark Andrejevic states, "Fan culture is at long last being deliberately and openly embraced by producers thanks in part to the ability of the Internet not just to unite far-flung viewers but to make the fruits of their labor readily accessible to the mainstream – and to producers themselves."[9] The Internet and convergence culture have fundamentally altered the traditional relationship between media producer and consumer, opening an increasingly reciprocal dialogue that is reshaping audience expectations regarding the entertainment experience in general, and participatory culture in particular.

At the center of this reconceptualization of the television audience is reflexive television programming and its characteristic invitations to tele-participation. As the television industry is increasingly affected by digital technology, diegetic reflexivity has not only emerged as a common industrial strategy through which to capture the ever-splintering audience, but it has also become a crucial element in viewers' expectations for the construction of television

programming. In her book, *Beyond the Box: Television and the Internet*, Ross asserts that many contemporary television shows, through either direct textual moments or even through paratextual interviews with series producers, are illustrating this heightened awareness of the existence of their fans both online and offline. As Ross states,

> … Invitation is best understood as a key factor in designating the relationship between viewer, text, and creator as a reciprocal one. The industry has come to learn that viewers want to be 'invited to the party,' so to speak. Creative professionals have responded to this growing knowledge with invitations to tele-participate…[10]

While Ross is specifically referring to narratively complex television series – which invite viewers to interact with the complexity of their storyworlds through such strategies as multi-layered plotting and narrative gaps – her assertions are directly applicable to the types of invitations to tele-participate that consistently appear on reflexive television. By deliberately encouraging viewers to violate the boundaries established by works of fiction, reflexive television series effectively invite the types of active audience engagement that comprise online communities of fans who seek to discuss their comprehension and interpretation of these reflexive moments. It is the visibility of these online fan cultures that increasingly contributes to a reconceptualization both of the television audience, as well as the relationship between media producer and consumer. As Ross states, "… The internet's placement 'between' sites of production and sites of reception creates a sense of proximity among those at work in these sites that in turn encourages a sense of reciprocity and closeness between industry professionals and viewers."[11] In other words, one of the resulting effects of this promise of shared control deployed by producers who publicly acknowledge their fans' impact on a given show is that of an implicit bridging of the long-established production-consumption divide.[12]

Chapter Summary

As I have previously established in this thesis, televisual reflexivity is defined by its use of various narrative strategies that serve to foreground the artifice and production context of television programming, ultimately revealing the status of reflexive television texts as mediated representations. In his book *Reflexivity in Film and Literature: From Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard*, Robert Stam asserts, "While illusionist art strives for an impression of spatio-temporal coherence, anti-illusionistic art calls attention to the gaps and holes and seams in the narrative tissue."[13] Stated simply, reflexive television exemplifies this concept of anti-illusionism in its function to remind its audience of the formal conventions of the medium, purposefully disrupting the narrative coherence and continuity typically maintained by fictional texts. This deconstruction of the boundaries traditionally associated with mediated texts is primarily achieved through the use of parody. For, as Linda Hutcheon states in her book *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms*, "… parody… is one of the major modes of formal and thematic construction of texts… [It] is one of the major forms of modern self-reflexivity…"[14] Parody provides the formal and thematic foundation through which reflexive television texts may employ the use of such strategies as meta-reference, meta-production, and meta-episodes in order to convey their self-reflexive messages. It is within the context of this assertion that I introduced my conceptualization of "meta-parody," a formal structure that uses various narrative techniques to self-consciously critique its own mediated nature. Furthermore, contemporary reflexive television is largely characterized by this self-conscious awareness of its own industrial, cultural, and production contexts, often serving to address the changing relationship between media producer and consumer. Importantly, this developing reciprocity is largely facilitated by digital media and the consumers who are

accustomed to using that digital media, as the transparency afforded by the Internet allows producers and consumers alike to participate in a more open and direct feedback system than was formerly possible. Generally, the purpose of this study is to explore the relationship between reflexivity as a formal development and its current industrial and cultural contexts.

Contemporary reflexive television relies on the use of specific narrative techniques for its textual application, with the three broader strategies that comprise the focus of this thesis defining my distinct intervention into the study of reflexivity. In what is perhaps the most common practice on reflexive television today, *meta-reference* is defined by purposeful self-critique and analysis, referring to the ways in which reflexive television series foreground their own mediation and constructedness. As evidenced by my textual analysis of *Arrested Development*, meta-reference employs the use of intertextuality, inside jokes, and voiceover/narration to both call attention to the artifice of a given series, and also to demonstrate the position of that series among other media texts. Like narratively complex programming in general, reflexive television shows that regularly employ the use of meta-reference indicate the producers' knowing pre-conceptualization and projection of their intended audience. In other words, the characteristic inclusion of subtle references both to the show itself and to other media texts suggests that producers presuppose a level of intelligence and media savvy in their audiences that will allow them to both recognize and appreciate the reflexive message.

A more questionable strategy of reflexive television due to its underlying commercial concerns, *meta-production* is defined by its knowing references to the production process. Whether through product placement or direct address, the use of meta-production illustrates a given series' awareness of its own industrial and production contexts. A textual strategy consistently employed on *30 Rock*, meta-production in general, and product placement in

particular, is often associated with the issue of commercialism. However, it is within the specific context of reflexive television that meta-production may be conceptualized as a form of media democratization. While the various techniques of meta-production are inarguably based in consumerism, reflexive television uses these techniques in a highly critical and satirical manner; offering media literate viewers the opportunity to first recognize the commercial function of these techniques, and then to demonstrate their media savvy by rejecting, or at the very least appreciating the humor in, their overtly commercial message.

Appearing across a broad range of generic and stylistic platforms, *meta-episodes* differ slightly from meta-reference and meta-production in their overall textual purpose. While these first two strategies primarily function to foreground the formal conventions of the television medium as a whole, meta-episodes seek to call attention to the accepted conventions of a particular series. In other words, meta-episodes are individual installments of a given program that either break with or make explicit established series conventions. For instance, textual analysis of *Supernatural* illustrates that meta-episodes critique program norms by self-consciously deconstructing such series characteristics as formal and thematic construction, the star personas and previous roles of actors, and genre. Additionally, it is within the context of meta-episodes that my conceptualization of meta-parody becomes particularly useful, as the textual manifestation of this strategy essentially refers to an episode that is entirely devoted to parody; a parody of which the series itself is the subject. Meta-episodes invoke audience engagement by diegetically addressing the experience of the viewer, challenging their knowledge and familiarity with a given program. Stated simply, after a series becomes established in its formal attributes, audiences know these conventions so well that meta-episodes exhibit their reflexivity by deliberately subverting and playing with that knowledge.

Although each of these reflexive strategies is unique, employing their own sets of narrative techniques and rhetorical functions, they are often combined and intermingled in practice. Meta-reference, meta-production, and meta-episodes all diegetically address the concept of producer awareness of consumer practices with varying degrees of subtlety. In other words, each of these three strategies projects a form of interactive audience engagement that presupposes a level of intelligence and media savvy on the part of the viewer for the successful transmission of their reflexive messages. Furthermore, as I have so far established, none of these strategies is entirely novel, but they are finding their way into contemporary popular culture with a new intensity and frequency that signifies their distinctive televisual pleasures.

Criticism

While the work of online fan communities whose members make their viewing preferences more transparent is an important component of our increasingly participatory media environment, the promise of greater media democratization brings with it its own set of issues. In his article "Watching Television Without Pity: The Productivity of Online Fans," Andrejevic explores the way in which the online activities of viewers, specifically those on the popular web site TelevisionWithoutPity.com (TWoP), act as a form of value-enhancing labor for television producers. He argues that while the work of online fans allows them to provide instant feedback to industry professionals, this same work has also become a marketing strategy for television shows that seek to take advantage of online audience engagement in order to build viewer loyalty. As reflexive television offers the narrative complexity and invitations to tele-participation that sustain such active online fan communities, the assertions of Andrejevic are of particular relevance here. Although he addresses the empowering and democratizing possibilities

of interactive media, Andrejevic ultimately concludes that the increasing visibility of active fan communities must be approached with more caution, as the exploitation of their online activities implies a form of audience labor that has the potential to be appropriated or commodified. While I argue that the deconstructive nature of reflexive television and digital media has fundamentally altered the relationship between producer and consumer, I do not mean to suggest that these changes are destabilizing to the broader forms of corporate control over popular culture. Rather, I have paid particular attention to any diegetic evidence of contemporary television's own interpretive frameworks and self-analysis, and how these types of internal reflexivity may pose a challenge to a non-participatory medium in an increasingly participatory culture.

In his canonical theorization of the communication process, "Encoding/Decoding," Stuart Hall addresses this entrenched control by arguing that the media industries are fundamentally hegemonic institutions working to secure a dominant social consensus. However, he also argues that this does not necessarily mean that audiences always interpret media texts in the same way. As Hall states, "… [Television's] connotative level… is more open, subject to more active *transformations*… Any such already constituted sign is potentially transformable into more than one connotative configuration."[15] In other words, Hall asserts the possibility for a multiplicity of readings, essentially arguing that audiences are not simply being mindlessly persuaded by media messages, but are rather "decoding" or interpreting media according to their individual backgrounds. Just as Hall initially cites the hegemony of the media industries, so do I acknowledge their long-established corporate control over popular culture. However, Hall's assertion of television's implicit transformable quality evokes the potential for active audience resistance that I ultimately argue applies to reflexive television and its characteristic invitations to tele-participation.

Despite referring specifically to the productivity of online fan communities, Andrejevic's argument speaks to the criticism surrounding contemporary reflexive television in general. While it would be an oversimplification to claim that certain programming trends are a direct reflection of audience preferences and viewing habits, I argue that the popularity of reflexive television is directly related to a number of broader industrial changes facilitated by digital media and the Internet. In other words, the current trend in televisual reflexivity is the result of a confluence of the increasing visibility of online audience engagement and larger changes in television programming engendered by digital technology. While feedback from online fan communities is not entirely responsible for the current popularity of reflexive television, there is no doubt that many of the innovations comprising narratively complex and reflexive television have become common because viewers actively embrace them. Employing the use of such new technologies as DVR, DVDs, and online participation, contemporary television viewers have played an instrumental role in consuming complex reflexive television, as well as helping it thrive within the media industries.[16] However, as reflexivity is a long-established narrative strategy within the discourses of both film and literature, I do not mean to suggest that its popularity is reliant upon the Internet. Rather, the emergence of digital media and its various new technologies have aided in both the distribution of reflexivity, as well as its resulting recognition and interpretations among viewers. Due to broader industrial changes facilitated by digital media, televisual reflexivity is currently appearing across a variety of different genres, inviting audience engagement through its distinct brand of complexity.

As I have previously discussed, the issue of reception – whether online or offline – is of particular importance to this study, especially when considered in relation to the critical potential of televisual reflexivity. While assertions regarding audience reception are inherently

problematic due to their highly speculative nature – as reception is always assumed rather than verified – it is important to consider the effectiveness of reflexivity's critical function as it is received by audiences. Due to its characteristically parodic and self-analytical nature, televisual reflexivity has the potential to critique not only the established conventions of a given series, but also to gesture beyond the text itself, analyzing the formal patterns of the medium as a whole, as well as larger social and cultural issues. However, meta-episodes are a distinct exception to this external critical function, as their analytical commentary is, by definition, restricted solely to the show and not to the medium as a whole. It is important to note that the broader critical function of reflexive television specifically relies upon the concept of a "preferred reading," which refers to the ability of the audience to comprehend the meaning of the reflexive message as it was originally intended by producers. In her article "Inside the Box: Accessing Self-Reflexive Television," Julie Levin Russo explains, "There is a line to be walked between not discounting self-reflexivity's meaningful critical function and not being naively optimistic about the audience's ability to take up this critical position…"[17] While the inherently critical function of televisual reflexivity is evident in its textual manifestations, the ability of the viewer both to recognize and interpret the intended message is decidedly less certain. However, I argue that digital media enable audiences to effectively consume narratively complex television by teaching them the skills necessary to situate themselves within an increasingly complex and postmodern media environment. As Jason Mittell states, "For television, contemporary complex narratives are foregrounding the skills of narrative comprehension and media literacy that most viewers have developed but rarely put to use beyond rudimentary means."[18] As contextualized through the concept of narrative complexity at large, reflexive television consistently projects this mode

of comprehension and media literacy, indicating the producers' faith in the ability of their audiences to comprehend the critical message.

Appearing across a range of different genres, contemporary reflexive television series are highly evocative of broader changes in the television industry engendered by digital media and the Internet. This current trend in televisual reflexivity is largely attributed to a confluence of factors enabled by digital technology, including the increased visibility of online participation and broader changes in programming practices as a result of digital media's effect on television as a whole. Contextualized through existing discourse in the areas of film and literature, reflexive television purposefully uses such narrative strategies as meta-reference, meta-production, and meta-episodes in order to self-consciously deconstruct the boundaries typically established by works of fiction. Stated simply, reflexive television uses these strategies to foreground the formal conventions of the medium, ultimately encouraging audiences to temporarily violate the traditional boundary between text and viewer. Facilitated through the transparency afforded by new media, contemporary reflexive television series both project active audience engagement, as well as reflect the increasingly interactive and participatory nature of the television industry.

Specifically within the context of narratively complex programming, I argue that the current trend in reflexive television reflects broader changes in the media industries, as well as anticipating a move toward more direct forms of audience engagement and interactivity. However, I do not claim that this particular iteration of the television text is indicative of the future of television in general, but I am claiming that its characteristic invitations to tele-participation are more common than one might suspect, as the industry has been working to both promote and manage this trend. Furthermore, I do not seek to posit the shows analyzed in this thesis as exemplary models of reflexive television, nor do I wish to assert their invitational and

narrative strategies as typical for the entire medium. Rather, I want to assert the ever-evolving changes in the way that audiences experience watching television; exploring how the emergence of digital media has affected viewers' expectations of television programming, fundamentally altering the relationship between media producer and consumer.

Although I place much of my focus on the importance of audience reception as it relates to reflexive television, I do not intend to overestimate the power of the media literate audience, or to underestimate the long-established control of the television industry. Instead, I argue that within the context of our contemporary digital society, television viewers are better equipped to interpret the types of narratively complex programming that currently populate the television airwaves. In fact, this multiplicity of audiences, texts, and contexts engendered by the effect of digital technology on the media industries suggests a need for individualized interpretation and analysis. For instance, an audience reception study would fill the need for a reconceptualization of the reflexive television audience that would navigate between the inherently critical function of this strategy and the ability of the audience to effectively comprehend its critical message. As both projected and reflected by contemporary reflexive television texts, this type of discourse surrounding the constitution and work of the television audience will only intensify as convergence and digital media require industry professionals to re-examine traditional assumptions regarding media consumption. As contemporary reflexive television anticipates the more directly interactive future of the medium, its distinct narrative strategies, rhetorical functions, and online fan responses will surely continue to evolve.

Notes

Introduction

[1] Craig Hight, *Television Mockumentary: Reflexivity, Satire and a Call to Play* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2010), 15.
[2] Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2006), 3.
[3] Ibid., 3.
[4] Sharon Marie Ross, *Beyond the Box: Television and the Internet* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 3.
[5] Ibid., 8.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Hight, 59.
[8] John Docker, *Postmodernism and Popular Culture: A Cultural History* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994), xviii.
[9] Margaret Rose, *Parody // Meta-Fiction: An Analysis of Parody as a Critical Mirror to the Writing and Reception of Fiction* (London, UK: Croom Helm, 1979), 65.
[10] Robert Stam, *Reflexivity in Film and Literature: From Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1985), 1.
[11] Ibid., 7.
[12] Werner Wolf, "Metareference Across Media: The Concept, its Transmedial Potentials and Problems, Main Forms and Functions" in *Metareference Across Media: Theory and Case Studies* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), 26.
[13] John Thornton Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 1.
[14] John Thornton Caldwell, "Cultures of Production: Studying Industry's Deep Texts, Reflexive Rituals, and Managed Self-Disclosures" in *Media Industries: History, Theory, and Method*. Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren, eds. (New York, NY: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 209.
[15] Wolf, 71.
[16] Joann Gardner, "Self-Referentiality in Art: A Look at Three Television Situation Comedies of the 1950s," *Studies in Popular Culture* 11 (1988), 35.
[17] Dentith, Simon. *Parody* (London, UK: Routledge, 2000), 9.
[18] Hutcheon, Linda. *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth Century Art Forms* (New York, NY: Methuen, 1985), 6.
[19] Dentith, 9.
[20] Ibid., 69.
[21] Rose, 66.
[22] Ibid., 97.
[23] Hutcheon, 16.
[24] Ibid., 44.
[25] Dyer, Richard. *Pastiche: Knowing Imitation* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), 4.
[26] Hutcheon, 82.
[27] Dyer, 5.

[28] David Thorburn, "Television as an Aesthetic Medium," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 4 (1987), 165.
[29] See, for further discussion of comedy verité, Brett Mills, "Comedy Verité: Contemporary Sitcom Form," *Screen* 45 (2004), 63-78.
[30] Ethan Thompson, "Comedy Verité? The Observational Documentary Meets the Televisual Sitcom," *The Velvet Light Trap* 60 (2007), 64.
[31] See, for further discussion of hyperreality, Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1994).
[32] Paul Booth and Brian Ekdale, "Translating the Hyperreal (Or How the *The Office* Came to America, Made Us Laugh, and Tricked Us into Accepting Hegemonic Bureaucracy)," in *American Remakes of British Television: Transformations and Mistranslations*, eds. Carlen Lavigne and Heather Marcovitch (Lanham, MD, Lexington Books, 2011), 197.
[33] Stam, 15.
[34] Brooke E. Duffy, Tara Liss-Mariño, and Katherine Sender, "Reflexivity in Television Depictions of Media Industries: Peeking Behind the Gilt Curtain," *Communication, Culture & Critique* 4 (2011), 304.

Chapter One: Meta-Reference

[1] Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth Century Art Forms* (New York, NY: Methuen, 1985), 1.
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[5] Wolf, 26.
[6] Joshua Green and Henry Jenkins, "The Moral Economy of Web 2.0: Audience Research and Convergence Culture," in *Media Industries: History, Theory, and Method*, eds. Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren (New York, NY: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 214.
[7] Ibid., 216.
[8] Brooke E. Duffy, Tara Liss-Mariño, and Katherine Sender, "Reflexivity in Television Depictions of Media Industries: Peeking Behind the Gilt Curtain," *Communication, Culture & Critique* 4 (2011): 297.
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[11] Brian Ott and Cameron Walter, "Intertextuality: Interpretive Practice and Textual Strategy," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 17 (2000): 439.
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[13] Robert Stam, *Reflexivity in Film and Literature: From Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1985), 20-23.

[14] Ott and Walter, 430.
[15] Duffy, et al., 303.
[16] Stam, 21.
[17] Jason Mittell, "Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television," *The Velvet Light Trap* 58 (2006): 32.
[18] Ibid., 33.
[19] Ibid., 35.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid., 34.
[22] Ibid., 37.
[23] Russo, 2.

Chapter Two: Meta-Production

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[2] Ibid.
[3] Joann Gardner, "Self-Referentiality in Art: A Look at Three Television Situation Comedies of the 1950s," *Studies in Popular Culture* 11 (1988) 36-37.
[4] Duffy, et al., 304.
[5] Ibid., 297.
[6] Mimi White, "Crossing Wavelengths: The Diegetic and Referential Imaginary of American Commercial Television," *Cinema Journal* 25 (1986) 61.
[7] Emily Nussbaum, "What Tina Fey Would Do For a SoyJoy," New York (2008) 90.
[8] Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2006), 3.
[9] Ibid., 243.
[10] Ibid., 241.
[11] Armstrong, et al., 40.
[12] Jennifer Armstrong, Lindsay Soll, and Tanner Stransky, "Ad Nauseum," *Entertainment Weekly* 1003 (2008) 39.
[13] Duffy, et al., 306.
[14] Ibid., 306.
[15] Nussbaum, 90.
[16] Ibid., 38.
[17] Simon Dentith, *Parody* (London, UK: Routledge, 2000), 32.
[18] Brian Steinberg, "Can Brand Fey Get Any Bigger? You Betcha," *Advertising Age* 80 (2009) 18.
[19] Duffy, et al., 304.
[20] Nussbaum, 35.
[21] Robert W. McChesney, "The New Global Media: It's a Small World of Big Conglomerates" *Nation* 269.18 (1999) 11.
[22] Duffy, et al., 305.

[23] Ethan Thompson, "Comedy Verité? The Observational Documentary Meets the Televisual Sitcom," *The Velvet Light Trap* 60 (2007) 67.

Chapter Three: Meta-Episodes

[1] Jeffrey Sconce, "What If?: Charting Television's New Textual Boundaries" in *Television After TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition*, eds. Lynn Spigel and Jan Olsson, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 100-101.
[2] Jason Mittell, "Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television," *The Velvet Light Trap* 58 (2006): 33.
[3] Jason Mittell, "Previously On: Prime Time Serials and the Mechanics of Memory," *Just TV*. Wordpress. 3 July 2009. <http://justtv.wordpress.com/2009/07/03/previously-on-prime-time-serials-and-the-mechanics-of-memory/>.
[4] Mittell, "Narrative Complexity," 35.
[5] Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London, UK: BFI Publishing, 1999), 14.
[6] Ibid., 21.
[7] Mittell, "Previously On."
[8] Mittell, "Narrative Complexity," 36.
[9] Ibid.

Conclusion

[1] Paul Booth, *Time On TV: Temporal Displacement and Mashup Television* (New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing, 2012), 24.
[2] Ibid., 209.
[3]Brooke E. Duffy, Tara Liss-Mariño, and Katherine Sender, "Reflexivity in Television Depictions of Media Industries: Peeking Behind the Gilt Curtain," *Communication, Culture & Critique* 4 (2011) 302.
[4] Jason Mittell, "Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television," *The Velvet Light Trap* 58 (2006) 32.
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[8] Mittell, "Narrative Complexity," 31-32.
[9] Mark Andrejevic, "Watching Television Without Pity: The Productivity of Online Fans" *Television & New Media* 9 (2008) 25.
[10] Ross, 21.
[11] Ibid., 10.
[12] Andrejevic, 33-34.
[13] Robert Stam, *Reflexivity in Film and Literature: From Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1985), 7.

[14] Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (New York, NY: Methuen, 1985), 2.
[15] Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Simon During (London, UK: Routledge, 1993), 512.
[16] Mittell, 32.
[17] Julie Levin Russo, "Inside the Box: Accessing Self-Reflexive Television," *Journal of eMedia Studies* 2 (2009) 1.
[18] Mittell, 39.

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